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Army • PFC

The words “hero” and “patriot” are tossed around loosely of late, but each year we celebrate three days for Americans most qualified to carry those descriptions.

Armed Forces Day celebrates all who serve in our military and Memorial Day honors those who have fallen in that service to the country.

On Nov. 11, we celebrate Veterans Day to honor all those who have served in our armed forces.

All three days are good times to remember that those who are most qualified to the title of “hero” and “patriot” are often those least likely to claim them, men like Brad Freeman, whose service in World War II are, quite literally, the stuff of books and movies.

When he passed away July 3 at age 97, Freeman had been the longest surviving member of World War II’s “Easy Company” of the 101st Airborne Division, Second Battalion, 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment made famous by the book and mini-series “Band of Brothers.” Until 2001 and the release of the HBO series, Freeman had lived quietly in his adopted hometown of Caledonia, serving as a mailman for 32 years and raising cattle, tending a vegetable garden, and content to be a good husband, a good father to two daughters and a good neighbor.

Suddenly, he was thrust, rather awkwardly, in the limelight.

It began in 2008, when Valor Magazine arranged for Freeman and other Easy Company members to travel to England for a ceremony at Buckingham Palace.

In addition to that ceremony, Freeman returned to Normandy in 2019 as an honored guest for the 75th Anniversary of D-Day. In 2020, Columbus Air Force Base held a ceremony at Freeman’s home, presenting him with a new flag. In May 2021, Freeman accepted a framed, autographed photo and note, along with a challenge coin — the highest ranking officer in the U.S. military honoring a serviceman of one of the lowest ranks — from U.S. Army Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Through it all, Freeman accepted the tributes with a sort of bewildered gratitude, a man touched by fame, but clearly unaffected by it.

“This is a surprise to me,” Freeman said during the Joint Chiefs of Staff celebration held on his front lawn. “I didn’t do anything that I wasn’t expected to do. I just listened to my officer and did what he said.”

Don Clardy, Freeman’s son-in-law, was in the audience for the event and wasn’t at all surprised by Freeman’s subdued reaction to “all the fuss.”

“He’ll probably be out there bush-hogging this afternoon,” Clardy said then. “That’s just the way he’s always been.”



Courtesy photo

Bradford Freeman of Caledonia, a member of World War II’s legendary “Easy Company’s Band of Brothers” was awarded the Legion of Honor by France in October 2016.

For those unfamiliar with the story, the exploits of Easy Company seem like a plot device used in an historical novel. At every dramatic event in the war’s final year, Easy Company and Freeman were thrust into the heart of the action — from Normandy (the Allied invasion of Europe on June 6, 1944) to the Netherlands (Operation Market Garden, immortalized in the book and film “A Bridge Too Far”) to Bastogne (The Battle of the Bulge) and, at the war’s end, the triumphant occupation of The Kehlsteinhaus (Hitler’s lavish compound located high in the German Alps and known as the Eagle’s Nest).

Freeman saw it all, survived it all as a private first class and a mortar man, then quietly returned home and resumed his life, rarely talking about his war experience.

“My folks didn’t seem much interested in what we did in the wart when I got back,” Bradford said in a 2016 Dispatch interview prior to a ceremony where he was awarded The Legion of Honor by the French government, its greatest military honor. “So we didn’t talk about it too much.”

When he was coaxed to talk about it, the stories were vivid but never self-congratulatory.

“I remember one time he mentioned that when he was in England, he had tea with Prince Charles (now King Charles III),” said Columbus historian Rufus Ward. “He was just so casual about it, talking about



Dispatch file photo

Bradford Freeman, of Caledonia, holds a display of badges and medals in 2016 from his time with Easy Company in Europe during World War II.

what a nice guy Prince Charles was and what a nice conversation they had. To him, Prince Charles was just a nice guy, no different than any regular person he might have talked to.”

Ward also recalls Freeman speaking at an event in Alabama in 2019.

“Mr. Freeman was asked if the American paratroopers really carried metal clickers, or ‘crickets,’ to use as signaling devices when they landed behind German lines the night before D-Day like was shown in the movie ‘The Longest Day,’” Ward wrote in a Sunday column for *The Dispatch*. “Mr. Freeman said that was true and they really did use them. He also commented he still had one the Army had given him. He had earlier shown his clickers to me and I noticed that they had been made by the ‘Acme Co.’ in England.

“In the movie ‘A Bridge Too Far,’ a British armored column rushing to cross bridges and rescue British paratroopers fighting to hold the Arnham Bridge in Holland during Operation Market Garden suddenly stopped for afternoon tea. Freeman said it not only happened, but he was there and even asked a British officer why they were stopping. The British officer looked at him and responded, ‘A spot of tea of Bloke.’”

Easy Company commander, Major Zac Shutte, had the pleasure of getting to know the few remaining survivors of that famous World War II unit.

“The first thing that comes to mind is what an honor it was to know Mr. Freeman,” Shutte said upon Freeman’s passing. “He had a unique sense of service that continued all these years after he took off the uniform. He’s redefined what service means to me. He was a part of a group of brave Americans



Air Force Lt. Col. Jason Barlow presents “Band of Brothers” veteran Brad Freeman with the challenge coin from Mark Milley, chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, while his daughter, Becky Clardy, looks on during a ceremony held at Freeman’s Caledonia home in this 2021 *Dispatch* file photo.

who raised their hand and decided to serve with no idea where they were going or what they would be asked to do.”

As Freeman put it, he was just doing his job.

But we know a hero and a patriot when we see one.

Profile by **Slim Smith** | ssmith@cdispatch.com

JOE CHESNUT

National Guard • Brigadier General

THE
DISPATCH

Starkville native Joe Chesnut joined the Mississippi National Guard in 1978 at 18, as a way to pay for his communications degree at Mississippi State University. Still, he never knew the places the Army would take him.

“It was something that interested me and helped pay for my college,” Chesnut said. “And I could get an early commission as a second lieutenant.”

Before he graduated from MSU in 1983, Chesnut went to an engineer officer basic training school in 1981, where he picked up an interest in the field. After graduating, he went back for advanced engineer officer training in 1986.

After working with the Mississippi National Guard for several years, he was sent to Jordan in 1994, where he worked as a logistics officer for the Crown Prince of Jordan, Abdullah II.

“He was a real cool guy to work for, very focused,” Chesnut said. “We did some work for him and got to watch a live fire training exercise.”

Chesnut also deployed to Germany, Bosnia, Korea and Japan as an operations officer, building piers and bridges, among other structures. He even participated in a project to reroof an orphanage in Mongolia in 1996.

Chesnut then joined an Army Reserve Command Unit and deployed to Iraq in January 2004 as a deputy brigade commander for the 20th Engineer Brigade outside of Baghdad. His brigade’s job was to conduct construction projects, repairing roads and bridges damaged by enemy forces. The work had to be done at night in darkness to protect the workers from attack.

“You take what is called a Johnson bridge, and my guys put it in at night with no lights to prevent people from firing on top,” Chesnut said.

But even under cover of darkness, it was still dan-



Soldiers from the 20th Engineer Brigade placed a bridge in the dead of night on a highway outside Baghdad, Iraq. Chesnut, who took the photo, said the work had to be done under cover of darkness to prevent the brigade’s position from being known by enemy insurgents.

gerous. Just traveling to the construction site could be deadly.

“I lost two Marines on the way to one of those, and they rolled up over an IED (improvised explosive device),” Chesnut said.

He left Iraq in December 2004 and, in 2009, was granted the rank of brigadier general at the 75th Training Command in Birmingham, Alabama. He later retired from the Army in 2014 and went on to do contract work for his family company, Chesnut Enterprises.

Now at 63, he is looking to retire while still doing small jobs here and there.

“Now I just do small jobs for about two or three re-altors, and I wish I could add about ten more people to work for me because I’m trying to quit,” Chesnut said.

Profile by **Grant McLaughlin** | grant@cdispatch.com



Joe Chesnut (center) stands with his engineering brigade team in Tikrit, Iraq, in 2004. Chesnut was a deputy brigade commander for the 20th Engineer Brigade outside of Baghdad, where he and his soldiers cleared roads of improvised explosive devices and repaired roads and bridges.



Joe Chesnut (middle) speaks with Polish engineers in Tikrit, outside of Baghdad. He and his brigade worked with several coalition forces as part of their role in the Army. Polish engineers participated with American soldiers on in-field repairs with Chesnut and his men.



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When Mark Smith first walked into the Marine Corps recruiting office at 17, he was coming from the Army recruiter's office and was initially turned away.

He didn't let that stop him, though. Instead, it solidified his desire to join the Marines.

"I first went to the Army recruiter office, which was right next door to the Marine Corps recruiter's office," Smith said. "The Army, especially back then, was pushing college degrees, free education, the benefits and all of that. I went into the Marine Corps recruiter office right after that and he said, 'Where did you just come from?' I said, 'The Army recruiter's office.' He said, 'You don't need to be in here.' He was an old, crusty Vietnam gunnery sergeant with tattoos and all of that. He was very intimidating, so I backed out and walked away. Then I got to thinking about it, and I thought, 'That's what I want to do. I want to be like that guy.'"

Smith enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps in 1985 through the delayed entry program before he finished high school. He began training in 1986.

As someone who said he didn't feel "college-ready," Smith had people doubting he would even make it through boot camp at Parris Island, South Carolina. Not only did he make it through, he excelled.

Smith was one of the four platoon honormen in his graduating class from boot camp. Each honorman is the individual who finishes first in their own platoon after the 13-week boot camp ends.

"My father put me on the Greyhound bus down here that sent me to Parris Island," Smith said. "He said, 'They'll send you back in two weeks.' And they nearly did, but I figured it out and was able to come out as the first in my platoon."

After finishing at boot camp, Smith headed to infantry training school at Camp Lejeune in North Carolina. Smith chose to stay with the military occupational specialty he was given of combat arms, which are Marines who participate in ground combat. He said he joined the Marines to be "the tip of the spear."

Once graduating from infantry training school also at the top of his class, he was chosen to go overseas to work at state department facilities such as U.S. consulates and embassies.

Smith was stationed in the Philippines for a year and a half, and he said it was his favorite duty station and the best part of being in the Marine Corps is the bonds he formed with others. In his four years of service, those bonds became unbreakable.

"I know it's kind of general, but I loved the camaraderie, the brotherhood," Smith said. "The best

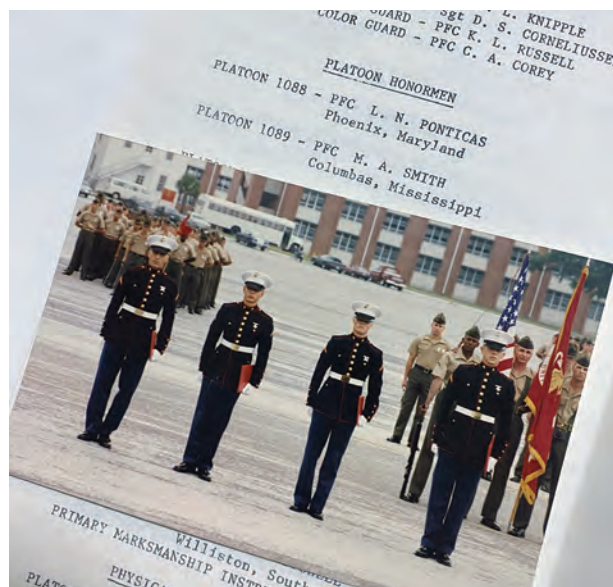


Photo by Jessica Lindsey/Dispatch Staff

Cpl. Mark Smith, second from left, stands with the other platoon honormen after completing boot camp on Oct. 31, 1986. Each honorman is the individual who finishes first in their own platoon after the 13-week boot camp at Parris Island, South Carolina ends. The program for the event sits behind the picture with Smith's hometown of Columbus misspelled.

friends I ever developed, even though I have great civilian friends, is when you put folks in really tough situations. You form bonds with your fellow Marines. It's hard to explain. ... To this day, I still have friends I was close with that live all over the country, and we still go and see each other and spend vacations together."

Smith was a corporal stationed at Camp Pendleton in California preparing to go to the first Gulf War when he was medically discharged from the Marines in 1990. Though he was unable to make a career out of the military due to injury, he credits his time in the Marines to making him the man he is today as the president of The CPI Group in Columbus.

"The structure — I needed that, and I will say it changed my life," Smith said. "It instilled a discipline within me that I really didn't even realize I needed but did — the structure, the chain of command, which is still important to my organizations today. I developed an attitude and drive to do the very best I can and attempt to be an overachiever. I did not ever complete college, I never got that opportunity, but the Marine Corps gave me the fundamentals for success."

Profile by **Jessica Lindsey** | jlindsey@cdispatch.com



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BRYAN FULLER

Army National Guard • Staff Sergeant

THE
DISPATCH

For Bryan Fuller it all boiled down to the desire to protect.

“I always wanted to do something in either the military or law enforcement,” Fuller said. “I always felt like protecting, I guess.”

Fuller, a native of Louisville, decided on the military thanks to Bruce Morris, his Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps instructor at Louisville High School. From there, it was a simple decision to enlist in the Army National Guard.

“I was wanting to join at 17, but I still wanted to complete high school,” Fuller said. “I could do that with the Guard.”

Two weeks after high school graduation Fuller was off to training, and two weeks after that he was at Camp Shelby Joint Forces Training Center, just outside Hattiesburg, for mobilization for the first of what would be five overseas deployments.

That first trip overseas was to Iraq, where Fuller served as a combat engineer because he thought it looked the most interesting of the various training options he was given.

“We dealt with explosives,” he said. “I chose it because it looked fun. We would drive down the side of the road looking for roadside bombs, and when we found them we would use a robot to go place a charge on them and blow it up.”

Beyond the explosives work, Fuller also operated equipment and was involved with transportation.

Heavy equipment was in his blood, he said.

“My dad and my uncle were loggers,” he said. “I grew up operating heavy equipment, so I’ve always done it.”

Over the years, Fuller would go on four combat deployments: three to Iraq and one to Afghanistan, and one further deployment to Kuwait, his most recent.

“I celebrated every other birthday overseas,” he said. “I turned 20 in Iraq. I turned 22 in Iraq. I turned 24 in Iraq. I turned 26 in Afghanistan. Literally every other birthday I was on a deployment. The longest I’ve been home since I graduated high school was the six years between getting back from Afghanistan in 2012 and going to Kuwait in 2018.”

Fuller credits the support of his wife, Kalyn, whom he called indispensable.

“Through all of that, I wouldn’t have been able to do it without her support,” he said. “Just her being there for me. We met in 2006, and got married in 2008. Less than six months after we got married, I was deployed again.”

Bryan and Kalyn have two children: Anna Alice, 11, and Anslee, 7.

Fuller is currently a staff sergeant, and works at the National Guard armory in Lowndes County as



Staff Sgt. Gary Shaffer, left, and Bryan Fuller, right, in Afghanistan in 2011.

a supply sergeant. He said he intends to stay in the guard.

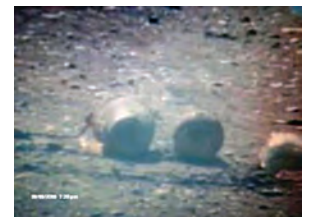
“I try to tell people who are thinking about joining that there are a lot of different jobs you can do in the military, regardless of what branch,” Fuller said. “Find something that doesn’t feel like work, so you actually look forward to going to work every day.”

Profile by **Brian Jones** | bjones@cdispatch.com



ABOVE: Shown is a Husky Vehicle Mounted Mine Detection System, similar to the one Fuller drove while deployed as a combat engineer.

RIGHT: An unexploded improvised explosive device sits along a roadside in Iraq. Part of Fuller’s job in Iraq was to find and destroy such bombs. This one is made of artillery shells and homemade explosive.





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ROBERT WINSTON NABORS THE DISPATCH

Army • Chief Warrant Officer 2

Chief Warrant Officer 2 Robert Winston Nabors always knew what he wanted to do with his life. “He was adamant that he was joining the Army, and he was going to be a soldier,” said his older sister, Keysha Jennings.

Nabors spent his years at Columbus High School in the Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps. When he graduated in 1999, he headed to Stillman College in Tuscaloosa, where he served in ROTC at the University of Alabama. Nabors’ identical twin brother, Marvin, also went into the military.

He was on track to achieve his dream along the same timeline as his brother, but then there was a setback.

“He had a little bit of a delay because he didn’t like water; he couldn’t swim,” Jennings said. “He was going in as a paratrooper. With being a paratrooper, he had to learn how to swim.”

Nabors took time to step away and reevaluate his goals. His desire to serve ultimately won out and he overcame the obstacle.

“He took a little break and then he finally accomplished his goal and he learned how to swim,” his sister said. “He got over that anxiety and then he enlisted.”

Nabors entered the United States Army with the intent of becoming an officer.

“He went in as an officer, and then from there he did multiple tours to Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran,” Jennings said. “He was a chemical analyst for the Army, so he went on very special trips and such.”



Courtesy Photo

Nabors trains in some of his gear.



Courtesy Photo

Nabors was a chemical analyst, which led to several special assignments.

Continuing his career, she said his crowning achievement was making it into Chief Warrant School, but along with it came tragedy.

“Going through that program, it was just amazing for him,” she said. “He didn’t stop at one, and he became chief warrant officer 2, and that’s when he was diagnosed with stage four Rhabdomyosarcoma.”

Rhabdomyosarcoma is cancer of the soft tissue. Despite his diagnosis, she said he never lost his smile.

“He still fought through it,” she said. “He was the person that always said, ‘I’m OK. I’m good,’ no matter how much pain he was in. He never lost his smile.”

Nabors passed away from his illness on Jan. 4.

Jennings remembers her brother as the proud soldier he was.

“You could see him come out of his shell because it gave him pride, serving his country,” she said. “Whenever the national anthem played or there was a flag around, his chest was held high. It was just an honor. He was like, ‘I wear this badge of honor because I am able to serve my country.’”

Nabors served from 2006 until his death.

Profile by **Robert Scott** | rscott@cdispatch.com

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JAMES SAMUEL

Air Force • NCO

THE
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Rev. James Samuel entered his military service in 1975 after experiencing a prophetic dream with him in uniform, standing alongside fellow airmen. After that, he decided he wanted more. He wanted a job to support his wife and young son; he said he found it in the Air Force.

A few days later, he walked into a recruiter's office in Columbus and went to basic training and later became a non-commissioned officer. He returned to the CAFB in 1978 as an administrative manager and was stationed there for four years.

"I didn't want to end up in a factory pressing nails for \$1.50 an hour the rest of my life," Samuel said. "I went to sleep, and in the dream, I saw myself in uniform, in line formation. We were marching."

He received his first overseas assignment in 1982 as an administrative manager at King Abdul-Aziz Air Force Base in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, for a year before being transferred to the Hickam Air Force Base in Honolulu, Hawaii.

Samuel spent much of his time working in the administrative offices of those bases. During his time in Hawaii, he built special relationships with fellow service members and locals, forming a family social club called No ka 'oi, which means "the best" in Polynesian. But in 1985, he began to miss the seasons of his Mississippi roots and decided it was time to transfer back home.

"I stayed there for three years," Samuel said. "When that was up, I was ready to return to Mississippi. I wanted to hear some thunderstorms and feel some seasons because they don't have seasons in Hawaii, but I had a good tour."

He was reassigned to CAFB in 1986 and left the service a year later, pursuing a career in automotive sales at Heritage Lincoln and Mercury, quickly becoming a top earner. He transferred to Menotti



Rev. James Samuel (third to the right, middle row) poses for a picture with fellow graduates of an officer training program at Keesler Air Force Base in 1975, in Biloxi. Samuel transferred to Columbus Air Force base in 1978 and worked there for four years before being assigned to a post in Saudi Arabia.

Honda in 1990.

"The first year, I think I came within \$25 of making \$50,000 that first year," Samuel said.

In 1995, he felt a higher calling to ministry and began a path toward preaching the gospel. In his 27 years of pastoring, now at Stephen Chapel Missionary Baptist Church in Columbus, he believes the Air Force motivated him, strengthened him to be successful and put him on his path to the church.

"If you don't have a dream, you don't have anything," Samuel said. "You ought to have something you're willing to fight and die for every day of your life. The Air Force gave me a chance to build on who God made me to be. To add on to what my mama raised me to be."

Profile by **Grant McLaughlin** | grant@cdispatch.com



Samuel speaks to high school students as a recruiter. In addition to being an officer, Samuel also worked in the Air Force Recruiter Assistance Program to educate students on the benefits of a military career.



Samuel poses for a photo with locals in Saudi Arabia in 1982. During Samuel's first overseas deployment, he was stationed there for a year as an officer before being transferred to a base in Honolulu, Hawaii.

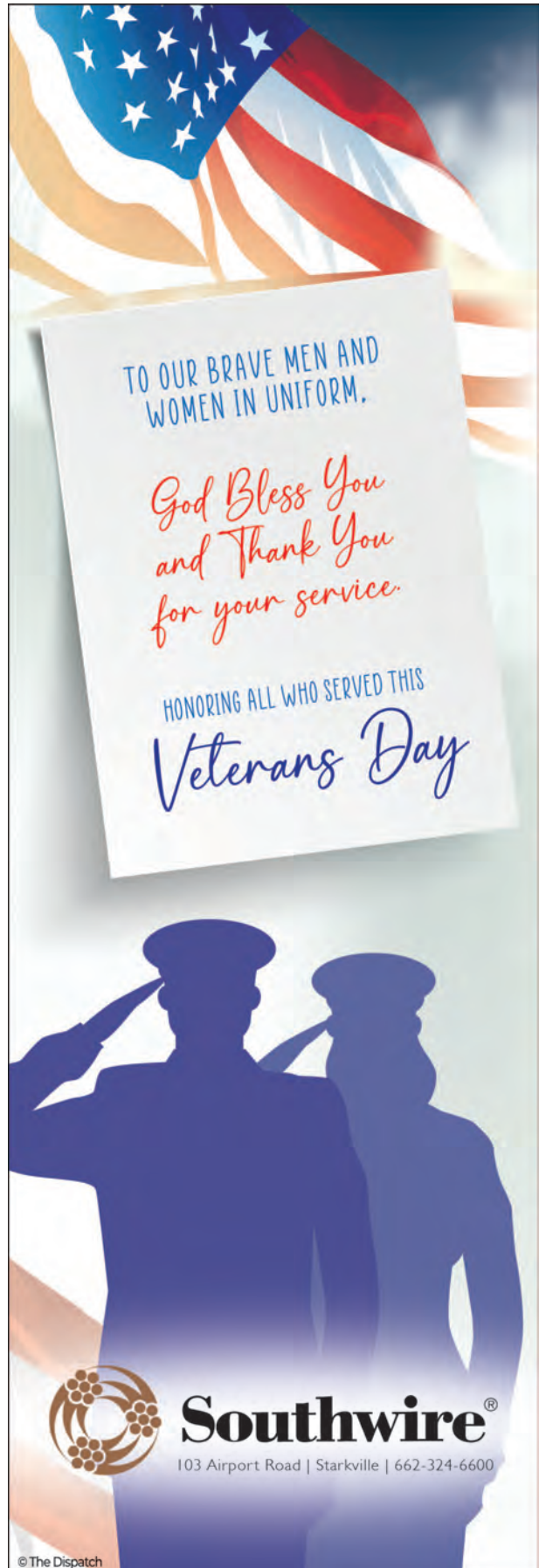
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~Jeff Miller



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JOHN TYLER MCSHAN

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Navy • Seaman First Class

Born in 1926, John Tyler McShan turned 18 toward the end of World War II.

As such, he had a desire to serve his country. He entered the Navy in 1943 with the intent of becoming an aviator. However, that would not come to pass due to timing.

“I joined the Navy Air Force. I was supposed to become an aviator,” said McShan, now 96. “They sent me to a small college in Birmingham, and I realized the war would soon be over and I wouldn’t be able to say that I fought in World War II.”

This led to him withdrawing from the program and heading into service.

“I dismissed myself from the college program and I got sent to bootcamp in Great Lakes, Illinois, and I finished that and was sent to Gunner’s Mate School in Farragut, Idaho,” he said. “Then I was assigned to a ship, the USS Pennsylvania, and we went to Okinawa.”

The decision to head into the line of fire might seem strange now, but he said it was a simple decision at the time. He wanted to feel he had done his part.

“Well, it was the patriotic thing to do. Everybody wanted to go if they were able,” he said.

While in the Navy as a seaman first class, his main duty was swabbing the decks as well as serving as second loader on the 40-millimeter quad gun. It was not smooth sailing for McShan, however.

In the waning days of the war, Japan made a desperate decision to strike against America. McShan found himself in the middle of it aboard the USS Pennsylvania. He said it is the most memorable thing from his time in the service.

“It was definitely the time we were torpedoed,” he said. “On Aug. 12, 1945, one of the last airplanes that the Japanese had, flew over and dropped a torpedo



Courtesy Photo

Pictured is the funeral for four of the 20 people that were killed during the torpedoing of the USS Pennsylvania. McShan is among the crowd.



Courtesy Photo

John Tyler McShan served in the United States Navy during WWII, from 1943-46.

on us. That was just three days before the war was over.”

This event was the turning point in McShan’s military career. He was not shy about saying it either.

“(My favorite thing about serving) was getting out,” he said without a hint of sarcasm in his voice.

He was dismissed from duty in June 1946.

“We were towed to Guam and they had to put a patch on us, then we went back to Burlington, Washington,” McShan said. “Soon after, I was assigned to a fleet boat pool in Portland, Oregon and I stayed there until I was dismissed.”

McShan found his way back home to west Alabama, and he remains there to this day.

He received multiple medals for his time spent in WWII.

They include the Good Conduct Medal, Victory Medal, American Theatre Medal and Asiatic Pacific Medal.

Profile by **Robert Scott** | rscott@cdispatch.com

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Marine Corps • Lt. Colonel

Lt. Col. Barry Montgomery grew up revering those in the military as heroes — ones he'd see on the silver screen in the news round up before the big movie began, and his father, a World War II U.S. Marine Corps veteran.

The Starkville native attended Mississippi State University, and upon graduation in 1964, he was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the Marine Corps.

"When we grew up, people in the military were somewhat looked at as heroes," Montgomery said. "My dad had been a Marine during World War II with all of his buddies, so I was surrounded as a kid with people that I really admired because of their service. There was no doubt that I was going to go into the Marine Corps."

In his 25 years of service, Montgomery was a platoon leader and executive officer of a tank company at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, an executive officer of Marine Barracks in Sanford, Florida, a tank company commander in Vietnam, a division adjutant in Okinawa, Japan, and a project officer for multiple programs.

Montgomery said the biggest highlight of his Marine career was working in research and development at the Development Center in Quantico, Virginia. There he served as the project officer for tank, mobile protected weapons systems and the light armored vehicles program.

The former Marine is responsible for developing a family of vehicles that could be carried by a helicopter for roughly 200 miles and could be ready for any type of terrain.

"I got involved with developing a vehicle that needed to be helicopter-transported, but it had to be under 14 and a half tons," Montgomery said. "That's not much of a vehicle, so I said I needed to do a family of vehicles so I can get the synergistic effect kind of like a wolfpack. You know one wolf can't do it, but a bunch of wolves can. So I developed the concept of a family of vehicles and had three of them that could be helicoptered out up to 200 miles."

Montgomery keeps a model of one of the first LAVs he helped develop on a shelf at his home. At first glance it looks like a toy military vehicle complete with a man inside. However, with a closer look, there are three signatures with messages written on the sides of the model.

Messages from retired U.S. Army Major Gen. Oscar Decker, one of Montgomery's commanders and a civilian who worked with the Army and partnered with Montgomery on the project adorn the sides.

The message from Decker reads, "To a great project and a great guy."

Montgomery didn't do it alone, though. Von, his wife of nearly 58 years, said she enjoyed her time as a military wife and a mother of three. She remembers when



Photo by Jessica Lindsey/Dispatch Staff

Lt. Col. Barry Montgomery shows off his model of one of the first LAVs he helped develop. The model includes a man inside and three signatures with messages written on the sides of the model. The messages are from retired U.S. Army Major General Oscar Decker, one of Montgomery's commanders and a civilian who worked with the Army and partnered with Montgomery on the project.

he was stationed in Japan the family was able to follow, and there they enjoyed their proximity to the beach.

"We paid our way for the kids and myself," Von said. "It was great. I arrived with three children, a dog and 12 suitcases, and we found a house to rent. There were other families doing the same thing, so it was like our own little community. We had no TV or phone for a year, and we had no air conditioner other than one little window unit. ... The kids loved it and never complained. Every Saturday we went to the beach and snorkeled."

Montgomery has kept in touch with his friends from his 25 years of service, and up until 2020 when COVID-19 hit, they would regularly visit each other.

His appreciation for those who served doesn't end with just his friends. Montgomery honors those who have passed away and rest in Memorial Garden Park Cemetery off Oktoc Road.

Each year since 2005 when his father passed away, he puts American flags at the headstones of those who've passed and served the country. Local students come to help sometimes, and in years past Montgomery's grandchildren have come to help.

Without missing a beat, both Barry and Von said they would do it all again if they could.

Barry turned to Von and asked, "To sum it up, would you do it again?"

"Oh, yeah," Von said.

"Would I do it again? You bet. You can't even dream of the things you get to do," Barry said.

Profile by **Jessica Lindsey** | jlindsey@cdispatch.com



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our gratitude,
we must never
forget that
the highest
appreciation
is not to utter
words, but to
live by them.”*

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Marine Corps • Sergeant

When Brantley Ravencraft got to Marine boot camp in September 1999, he didn't know what to expect or what he would do. That was all about to change.

He went to Camp Pendleton, north of San Diego, from his hometown of Gloster near the Pacific coast and quickly learned that boot camp would not be an easy affair.

"Bootcamp is an eye-opening experience, for sure," Ravencraft said. "It's hard to explain how mentally tough it is from moving from Southwest, Podunk Mississippi into a freakin' meat grinder."

From there, Ravencraft went to field operator training at Twentynine Palms in San Bernardino County. There he learned how to operate radio technology and, in March 2000, began training for a reconnaissance battalion based out of Camp Lejeune, North Carolina.

After a year at his first assignment, he was deployed to the Middle East as part of Operation Enduring Freedom in response to the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001. He would deploy four other times in Iraq and Afghanistan from 2002 to 2006.

During his final deployment to Iraq in 2006, Ravencraft said he questioned if he would make it home. During a mission in Fallujah, he was blown up



Brantley Ravencraft stands on a dock at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. Behind him is the ship he would travel on during his first deployment, USS Trenton. On that ship, his combat unit would travel to Bahrain and the Middle East, undergoing tactical operations.

by a roadside explosive and knocked unconscious.

On that day, he joined his unit on patrol in the city's northern section. He was walking up a road when suddenly an insurgent detonated a wired bomb, not even 20 feet from where he was standing.

"He detonated when I was on the other side of the road," Ravencraft said. "If he would have waited until I had gotten a little further, he probably would have knocked me off the board for good."

He sustained extensive injuries and was knocked unconscious. The next thing he remembered was waking up in a hospital in Iraq before passing out again and waking up in Germany some time later.

"I remember waking up in Iraq at some point, and the only reason I know that is because that's what my medical records say," Ravencraft said. "I was there for some period of time. And then the next time I woke up, I was in Germany."

Ravencraft left the service in 2007, having recovered from his injuries. After returning back to the states, he eventually went back to school for two years at Holmes Community College for two years before leaving and then finishing his bachelors in Health and Safety at Waldorf University Online.

Now, he lives with his wife in Starkville and works as an environmental safety specialist at Aurora Flight Sciences in Lowndes County, adjacent to the Golden Triangle Regional Airport.

"It's a lot of procedure writing, training, compliance, those types of things," Ravencraft said. "It fits well for a guy coming out of the military. If I had known about it first coming out of the military, it would have been perfect."



Brantley Ravencraft stands in his Marines uniform shortly before leaving for basic training in 1999. He grew up in Gloster near the coast, where he gained a desire to join the United States Marine Corps.

Profile by Grant McLaughlin | grant@cdispatch.com



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Army • Lt. Colonel

Lt. Col. Brian Locke never thought twice about entering the military, joining the Tennessee National Guard immediately after high school in 1990.

“At the time, as a high school kid, I didn’t think I wanted to go to college,” he said. “So, I was kind of looking at what my options were and what I wanted to do. I had a grandfather who served in World War II. He was always telling me stories about the military and his experiences, so it was always something that was kind of in the back of my mind. As I got closer to graduating high school, I didn’t have a clear path set out before me so I was like, ‘You know what, let’s join the military. It sounds like a good option for me.’”

He decided to attend college after all, but he continued to serve in the National Guard throughout his four years at Middle Tennessee State University, where he was also in the United States Army Reserve Officer Training Corps program.

From there, he went on to become an officer in the Army. He served for 23 years before retiring and taking on his current role as the director of veterans and military affairs at Mississippi State University.

“I spent 23 years on active duty,” he said. “I retired in 2017, and I’ve been here at Mississippi State since 2013. I came here as my last Army assignment, as a professor of military science here. Then I retired and moved into my current job.”

While in the service, however, he was military police. He spent time in Germany, Bosnia, Afghanistan, Fort Carson, Colorado, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas and West Point, New York.

His deployment to Afghanistan was for Operation Enduring Freedom, in 2007.

“I deployed once to Afghanistan where I was a trainer and mentor to the Afghan National Police,



Courtesy photo

Brian Locke is pictured with Afghan National Police Officers at the regional training center in Gardez, Afghanistan.



Courtesy photo

Locke, left, swears in new contracted cadets for the Army ROTC on the Drill Field at Mississippi State University.

and then I deployed once to Iraq where I was running a detainee facility, so I did a lot of detainee operations and training with the Iraqi correctional force,” he said.

Though he retired from the military, he still has a desire to help his community.

He also serves as the captain of the reserves for Starkville Police Department.

“I had law enforcement in my blood so I continued to serve my community in a law enforcement capacity,” he said.

Locke received many awards and decorations during his time in the service.

They include: Bronze Star Medal, Meritorious Service Medal, the Army Commendation Medal, Joint Service Achievement Medal, Army Achievement Medal, National Defense Service Medal, Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal, Afghanistan Campaign Medal, Iraqi Campaign Medal, Global War on Terrorism Service Medal, Armed Forces Service Medal, NCO Professional Development Ribbon, Army Service Ribbon, Overseas Service Ribbon, NATO Medal (Bosnia and Afghanistan), Parachutist, Air Assault Badges, German Armed Forces Proficiency Badge and has been awarded the Military Police Order of the Marechause in Bronze.

Profile by **Robert Scott** | rscott@cdispatch.com



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JIM MARTIN

Air Force • Major General

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Wars aren't always fought with bullets or missiles. Sometimes, it's math.

Jim Martin served for more than three decades in the United States Air Force. He started out in the Reserve Officers Training Corps at Mississippi State University, and ended his career a major general at the Pentagon, where he helped manage the budget for the entire USAF.

Martin is a native of a small farming town called Caruthersville, in the bootheel of Missouri. He came to MSU for his undergraduate, where he enrolled in the ROTC.

"I had a desire for service," he said, "and it was also an opportunity to have the Air Force pay for my education. It was my intention to stay in for four years and get out, but before I knew it I had served 32 years and was retiring in Washington, DC."

Martin was commissioned on Dec. 20, 1985, and entered active duty on Jan. 4, 1986. He stayed in the service until retiring in 2017. Along the way he still managed to get that education, though, earning three master's degrees while in uniform.

He also served in a variety of financial management positions, starting his career as a budget and finance officer. His duties included stints as major command comptroller at the headquarters of Pacific Air Forces, and chief financial officer for Air Force Materiel Command before going on to the staff of the Air Force itself.

Seven of the last eight years of his Air Force career were spent there at the Pentagon.

"I managed the formulation and execution of budgets that exceeded \$130 billion a year," he said. "I



Major General Martin with the Chief Master Sergeants in the Air Force Financial Management Career Field. Major General Martin served with this group for three decades.

was there during sequestration and during all of the bipartisan budget acts. We were all laser focused on making sure resources were in the right place at the right time to make the best use of taxpayer money and still deliver our mission."

The camaraderie and teamwork he saw during his time in the military have stuck with him, he said.

"I loved every assignment, and I saw the value of what the people were doing for our nation," he said. "People came from all over the nation, from very diverse backgrounds, but we all worked together to achieve our mission."

After retiring, family connections and a job offer drew Martin back to the Golden Triangle.

"I met my wife here at MSU," he said. "We've always called Mississippi our home. I think during the course of my career I've had 19 moves, and in between every assignment and on holidays we would come back to Mississippi to visit family."

When Martin was offered a job at MSU, there was no hesitation in taking it. He is currently associate vice president for corporate engagement and economic development.

"I see the same spirit here at the university that I saw in the military," he said, "which is a desire to serve and to make our state and our nation better. I'm truly blessed to be here and to have the opportunity to serve."

Profile by **Brian Jones** | bjones@cdispatch.com



Major General Martin presenting the Air Force Budget Rollout Brief Fiscal Year 2017 to the media.

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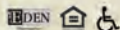
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WALLACE KILLCREAS

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Navy • Lt. Commander

In 1966, a young man from George County joined the United States Navy with a desire to become a pilot.

Lt. Commander Wallace Killcreas, who now calls Starkville home, signed up for the Navy in 1966 and began his four-year stint as an active duty sailor in January 1967. Though he joined the pilot program, Killcreas eventually turned to computing after figuring out his flight skills were not where they needed to be.

“I didn’t break any of their airplanes, but I didn’t fly very well,” Killcreas said. “I was in that part of the Navy for nine months. ... Actual flight training, I had about four or five months under my belt. Then I went to Washington, D.C.”

Prior to going into the Navy, Killcreas obtained a master’s degree and schooling from the Mississippi State University computer center, which he described as similar to MSU information technology services.

Because of this background, he was sent to a training base for military computer programmers. Once finishing training in D.C. after four months, Killcreas was sent to Norfolk, Virginia, to work at the Atlantic Command Operations Control Center.

“The first Navy computer I saw was the second computer that was built,” Killcreas said. “I was really happy I got to see that. It was this huge thing that was bigger than this house, and it was nothing but computer. It had vacuum tubes and all of that. You got to see some things that you wouldn’t get to see before joining. There’s no way I would have ever gotten to see that otherwise.”

Killcreas was serving at the Atlantic Command Operations Control Center when he made his contribution to the Vietnam War. Killcreas said because he was stationed on the East Coast, he didn’t see action like those elsewhere did during the conflict.

“I was kind of in a support role for Vietnam,” Killcreas said. “The op-con center was designed to support the Atlantic fleet. The Navy is divided into two parts: the Atlantic fleet and PAC — the Pacific fleet. They divided the Navy up by seas. I did do some support of units that were in Vietnam, but they were usually like air units or other things like an aircraft carrier or destroyer. At that time, there were about 300-plus ships that we kept up with.”

After finishing four years of active duty in the Navy, Killcreas entered the U.S. Navy Reserve where he stayed for nearly a decade before leaving the Navy altogether.

After leaving the Navy, Killcreas taught computer science and agricultural economics at MSU



Killcreas stands proudly holding the picture from his wedding day. Killcreas served on active duty in the Navy for four years then spent nearly a decade in the Navy Reserve. He served at the Atlantic Command Operations Control Center when he made his contribution to the Vietnam War.



Wallace Killcreas and his wife, Christina, have been married for 55 years. The two got married in Pensacola and now reside in Starkville.

for 37 years. Now he lives a happy retired life in Starkville with his wife of 55 years, Christina.

Profile by **Jessica Lindsey** | jlindsey@cdispatch.com


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JOHNNY BISHOP

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Army • E-7 Sergeant First Class

It was a hot summer day in 1949 when Columbus native Johnny Bishop decided to sign up for the United States Army. He needed a job and something to do, but he never thought his decision would lead to a deployment in Korea just a year later.

Before signing anything, the recruiting officer told him to enlist as unassigned, meaning he could be given any job within the Army.

“That was the bottom of the pit; you get whatever comes,” Bishop said. “This was August 1949. I thought it was a pretty good deal. You got three meals each day and a good place to sleep.”

After completing basic training in early 1950, he spent a year at Fort Gordon, Georgia, and Camp McCall in North Carolina, training in communications and decoding. From there, he was sent to California and then Japan en route to serving in the Korean War.

When he arrived in Japan, he was instructed to shoot a rifle down range for combat training. Before the last shot in the gun was fired, he was qualified to an infantry unit headed for the front lines in place of his communications role.

“They carried out the rifle range first thing, gave us an M-1 rifle, and we had to shoot stapled ammunition through it on the range,” Bishop said. “They said ‘OK, now you are a frontline man.’”

It was the fall of 1950 when Bishop finally made it to Korea. Upon arrival, he was told he was a POL (petro-



Johnny Bishop poses at Fort Bliss, Texas, in 1956. After leaving Korea in 1951, Bishop stayed in the Army and was deployed to Fort Bliss five years later as a supply officer.

leum oil and lubricants) and his job was to refuel vehicles. Only days later, he was instructed to drive a truck north filled with gasoline and supplies in the middle of the night. It was on that drive he saw something he's never forgotten.

“I saw a big bump on the road,” Bishop said. “I thought it was a house fire, but the closer I got off the side of the road, I saw human bodies being burned. Maybe 150 North Koreans stacked up; the smell was horrible.”

Bishop was up for rotation back to the states a year later when his commanding officer offered him a 30-day extension.

“I said, ‘No, I’m going back to Mississippi; I’m getting out of the Army,’” Bishop recalled. “I came back and got home the day before Thanksgiving in 1951.”

But Bishop stayed in the Army until Aug. 31, 1969. He was assigned as a supply officer in France, Germany, Fort Bliss, Texas, and finally as a recruiter in Natchez.

After retirement from the service, Bishop worked in automotive sales in Columbus and eventually opened Bishop’s RV, a recreational vehicle dealership, in 1995. Now at age 91 and fully retired, Bishop boasts he retains his marksmanship.

“Hell, I’ll be 92 years old in December; I’m still a good shot with a pistol,” Bishop said.

Profile by **Grant McLaughlin** | grant@cdispatch.com



Johnny Bishop uses a telephone while deployed in North Korea in 1951. Bishop joined the Army in 1949 and was shipped off to the Korean War in the fall of 1950.

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Navy • Master Chief Petty Officer

Sometimes happenstance shapes your life. For John Thomas Lewis Jr., it was who was and wasn't gone to lunch.

It was 1957, and Lewis, a native of Greensboro, North Carolina, had just graduated high school. He had decided that he wanted to join the service, something he had decided on at an early age.

"I had an uncle who died at Normandy," he said. "I was old enough, having been born in 1939, to be aware of the war at the time. When he came home I remembered the ceremony, and I said that's what I was going to do. I've been patriotic ever since."

When Lewis went to the recruitment office, it was lunch. The Army and Marine Corps recruiters were at lunch. The Navy recruiter wasn't.

"There was an old chief petty officer standing outside his door, and I saw him and walked down there," he said. "I told him I was looking for the Army, but they were gone."

Lewis ended up enlisting in the Navy instead and was sworn in on May 21, 1957. He would stay in for the next 20 years, retiring in 1977 in Pensacola, Florida.

"I was able to advance to master chief petty officer, an E-9," he said. "There's only one higher, and that's master chief of the Navy. They wear three stars. I wore two stars. Only about 1 percent of the Navy are advanced to E-9."

Lewis served as a personnel man, and his years in the Navy took him all around the world — literally.

"I went around the world three times," he said. "I crossed the equator at least two times going and two times coming back. I was in the Mediterranean twice, and in the Pacific three times."

Lewis served during the Vietnam War on ships that participated in that conflict.

"I went to Vietnam twice," he said. "I served on the Independence and the Saratoga, both of which were aircraft carriers. We were in the Tonkin Gulf on several occasions in 1972."

The Gulf of Tonkin is at the northwestern portion of the South China Sea, located off the coast of northern Vietnam and southern China.

Lewis said he liked some places he visited more than others.

"I liked Rome," he said. "That was one of my favorite places. I was able to do a little touring while we were there, and there are just a lot of things to see and do. The Philippines were also very nice. The people there were very good people and they were very good to us."

Okinawa also stood out, he said.

"There was a big battle there in World War II, and all the services were still on the island when I was there in 1959," he said. "I served on shore patrol there, and that was good because you get out and get to know the



John Thomas Lewis Jr., is a North Carolina native who served for 20 years in the US Navy before moving to New Hope. This undated photo shows him during the 1970s at the rank of master chief petty officer.

people."

The Battle of Okinawa was a major battle in the Pacific campaign during WWII. Beginning on April 1, 1945, it was the largest amphibious assault in the Pacific theater.

Lewis retired from the service in 1977 and he and his wife, Betty, moved back to North Carolina. He went to college on the G.I. Bill, got a degree in criminal justice and went to work for the state. After retiring from that job, however, he and his wife headed for Mississippi.

"We decided to move to where my son was," he said. "He had been in the Air Force and lived in New Hope. He met his wife, Glenda, here. We liked her family, everybody just fell in love with each other."

Lewis and his wife moved here, settling in New Hope Park, in a house about four miles from his son.

"Everything just fell into place with us," he said. "We've been happy ever since."

Lewis spoke highly of his time in the Navy.

"I can't say enough about the military and the Navy," he said. "A lot of people don't like the services, but I was in with some great guys. As long as you keep yourself straight and do your best the officers will treat you like a brother."

Military service runs through Lewis' family. His son served in the Air Force, his daughter married an Army pilot and his grandson, Jared, served in the National Guard.

"I will say it again, I am blessed," he said. "I am very proud of my family and their careers."

Profile by **Brian Jones** | bjones@cdispatch.com



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LEE HANKEY

Air Force • Master Sergeant

If there was one thing that was apparent about United States Air Force Master Sgt. Lee Hankey, it was that he loved the Air Force, according to his daughter Carli Hauerwas.

“He served for 20 years in the United States Air Force, and we moved around a lot, but we’ve lived in Columbus for a good portion of that,” she said. “After he retired, he actually worked as a civilian until he passed away. So, he was all about the Air Force.”

He worked at the Columbus Air Force Base, as a civilian, in the logistics and services department. One of his main roles was ordering uniforms and needed supplies for the base and its personnel.

Born on Feb. 16, 1964, in Mt. Clemmons, Michigan, Hankey followed in his father’s footsteps by joining the Air Force in 1987.

It was in the service, while deployed to England, that Hankey met his wife, Dianna. They married in 1989.

Hauerwas said Hankey didn’t tell many stories about his time in the service, and she and her younger sister, Catherine Bigham, were “pretty young” when he retired in 2006.

There was one story that she remembers him telling, though.

“One of the coolest stories I remember being told was that in 1992 he went to South America on deployment to do a drug interdiction and intercept drugs being brought into the U.S.,” she said.

Hauerwas said that while he loved the Air Force, he loved his family even more.

“He was really family oriented,” she said. “Everything was about our family and togetherness.”

That didn’t change when he was diagnosed with leukemia either.

“Once he got sick, it was even more about that, wanting to do stuff and just being together,” she said.

Hankey passed away from his illness on March 27, 2019.



Courtesy photo

Master Sgt. Lee Hankey served for 20 years in the United States Air Force.

Hauerwas said that she and her family remember Hankey for his devotion to them and his genuine desire to help people.

“He just wanted to help people and he always had good morals and wanted what was best for us,” she said.

In addition to his wife and two daughters, Hankey had seven grandchildren.

Profile by **Robert Scott** | rscott@cdispatch.com



Courtesy photo

Hankey holds his daughter, Carli.



Courtesy photo

Hankey sits in the dining hall at Greenham Common AFB in England.



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—Mark Twain



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JARED LEWIS

Army National Guard • 1st Lieutenant

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Columbus native Jared Lewis came to the military later than most. Instead of going in straight out of high school, or even after college, he enlisted in the Army National Guard at the ripe old age of 27.

Lewis graduated from Heritage Academy in 2005, graduated from Delta State, and ended up working as an aircraft mechanic at Columbus Air Force Base. The pilots, combined with a family heavy on military service, drew him to enlist himself.

“I felt the need to serve my country,” he said. “It was being friends with all those pilots, and my granddad did it, my daddy did it. It’s almost like it was something I couldn’t shake off. It was in my blood.”

Lewis’ grandfather was a master chief in the Navy, and his father was in the Air Force.

“The older I got, the more it pulled on me,” he said. “You’ve only got one life to live, you might as well go out and get it and do the things you want to do.”

In the Guard, Lewis was a field artillery officer. After training in Texas and Oklahoma, he was deployed in 2018 as part of Operation Inherent Resolve, which was the U.S. operation against the Islamic State.

“We touched down in Kuwait, and I ended up going to Syria right out of the gate,” he said. “I was in southern Syria, north Jordan and then in northern Syria on special operations bases.”

One of those positions was close to a massive refugee camp, Lewis said.

“I learned never to take for granted what we have here,” he said. “We were outside of a 40,000-person refugee village. It’s hard to explain what you see, they were just the poorest of the poor. There were gunshots every night, people dying.”

Lewis said there were bright points, too. He became interested in the local language and culture.



Jared Lewis in southern Syria.

“With some Jordanians we went out and found a goat herder and bought a goat and they killed it in their halal way,” he said. “They cooked their traditional dish, mansif. It was just really cool to see how those guys operated.”

Halal food is food that is prepared according to Islamic law. Mansif is a dish made of lamb cooked in a sauce of fermented dried yogurt and served with rice or bulgar.

“That was one of my favorite parts,” he said. “Just the cultural aspect of it, being able to hang out with these guys and see how they do things.”

Lewis got out of the service in 2020 after about five years. He is currently owner and chief operations officer for Apex Ammunition. His wife, Valerie, is on active duty with the Air Force and currently stationed at CAFB. They have a five-year-old daughter, Juliana.

Profile by **Brian Jones** | bjones@cdispatch.com



A Bradley Fighting Vehicle, photographed by Lewis in 2018, in El Paso, Texas.



Lewis holds a silver coin minted by the Islamic State.



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MARVIN WINSTON NABORS THE DISPATCH

Army • Lt. Colonel

Lt. Col. Marvin Winston Nabors is representing the Friendly City in the nation's capital in his role as an inspector general for the United States Army at the Pentagon.

The Columbus High School graduate was influenced by the proximity to the Columbus Air Force Base to join the military, but when he was kicked out of the CHS Air Force Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps, he decided to turn to the Army.

"I was actually going to join the Air Force," Nabors said. "So what happened I actually got kicked out of AFJROTC for something that was not my fault. My instructor thought I cheated on what was supposed to be a really hard test, which I didn't, but the knowledge just came so easy. I made like a 98, and I didn't cheat. If I knew what I do today, I would've rebutted, but I left AFJROTC. I always thought the Army was cool, and they look better in their uniforms, so I decided on the Army."

Nabors joined the Army Reserve in 1999 and decided to double up in college. Nabors started his college career at Stillman College in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, but because he had aspirations of being an officer in the Army, he also began taking classes at the University of Alabama in order to participate in ROTC.

Nabors finished college in three years and began his active duty stint in the Army. He has been stationed in various Army bases across the country, served three tours in Iraq and one tour in Afghanistan.

Nabors was also able to share his experience in the Army with his identical twin, Robert.

Robert began his time in the Army later than Marvin, and Marvin recalls a few times many people didn't realize he had a twin. One such time was when Marvin was a captain and only overlapped his brother, who was a private, at Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri.

"I was there for school," Marvin said. "When I left, a friend of mine reached out because he was a class behind me. He said, 'Winston, man, I'm trying to tell all



Robert Winston Nabors and Marvin Winston Nabors stand together in uniform for a picture. The identical twins were both in the Army together and had some overlap in their duty assignments.

these people here that you didn't get demoted because they don't believe you're a twin.' Basically, they would rather believe I got into it with an instructor, and they demoted me all the way down. I said, 'Dude, that's impossible.' But they would rather believe that than that I have an identical twin brother floating around, even though I mentioned it to them."

Robert passed away in January, but Marvin recalls the good memories with his brother.

Marvin is still serving in the Army, working as an inspector general where he does work similar to that of internal affairs, balancing and checking the Army. Unlike some roles in the military, those who work as an inspector general must be specially chosen to work in that role.

"You don't select to be IG, IG selects you," Nabors said. "As a commissioned officer, your packet goes through all these different levels of approval. Then the three-star general goes through all of the packs and says, 'Hey, I want this person.' Obviously you can't have any adverse action in your file."

Nabors has enjoyed his time in the military saying it allows him to travel, but it also has provided him with personal development, career growth and stability.

Though he is a military man through-and-through, he also likes to explore his more artistic side. Using a pseudonym of "Stone Michaels," Nabors is a published author of two books: "Defining Atlas" and "Life, Love, & You." He also makes inspirational posters with photographs and is a trusted art seller with The Art Storefronts Organization.

"It's all about inspiration," Nabors said. "Some quotes from my second book are actually prints on my website. ... When I tell people about that, because it's such a contrasting dynamic from being this hardcore Army officer, they're like 'Oh, you're an artist!' I've never looked at it that way, but yeah, I am."

Profile by **Jessica Lindsey** | jlindsey@cdispatch.com



Marvin Winston Nabors salutes in his dress uniform.

DANIEL CRIDDLE

THE
DISPATCH

Army • Chief Warrant Officer 2

On Oct. 11, 2001, 23-year-old Daniel Criddle followed his father and brothers in a long-standing family tradition of military service.

Growing up in West Point, Criddle never had much. He dropped out of high school at age 15 to work and help pay bills. He saw the military as an eventuality; his brothers and his father all served before him, and he believed it was the only way out of the life he had growing up.

“I came from a long line of poor people,” Criddle said. “Just to be totally honest, there was really no other way to say it. The Army was my way out.”

After he joined, Criddle went through basic infantry school at Fort Benning, Georgia, and Jackson, North Carolina. When he finished school, he went to his unit as a recovery maintenance operator in the 223rd Engineering Battalion based in West Point and was stationed in Aberdeen.

A year into his assignment, his unit was activated and sent to Iraq in January 2003. It underwent mobilization training at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, in the dead of winter and then flew to Kuwait before heading to the Iraqi border.

“I’ll never forget the day we finished that training,” Criddle said. “It was snowing, and ice was coming down. We got on a plane, and 22 hours later, I landed in Kuwait, where it was 120 degrees.”

Criddle and his unit would make their final stop at Camp New Jersey in the middle of the desert to wait for the command to enter Iraq in late March, marking the beginning of the second Iraq war.

“We waited on the border until they pulled the trigger,” Criddle said. “We went across the border



Daniel Criddle poses for his enlistment photo at Fort Benning, Georgia. After attending boot camp there in 2001, he joined the Army as a field recovery operator.

into Iraq that night with 135 vehicles in that convoy. We went all the way from Kuwait to Tikrit.”

As a member of the engineering division, Criddle was on the front lines of the war. His job was clearing mines and roads for basic infantry to have safe passage on missions. While on deployment, he said soldiers often spoke about what would happen when they finally went home.

“It is a different kind of philosophy when the only thing you talk about is when you’re going home. It has a really unique feel to it,” Criddle said. “A lot of veterans would probably understand that, because when you get somewhere, and you’re sitting around, everybody talks about what they’re going to do when they go home. So you’re always planning for the future, but you’re living for the day.”

Criddle returned to Mississippi in the spring 2004 to work as a diesel mechanic in West Point and then as a non-commissioned supply officer in Aberdeen. He was deployed again to Afghanistan in 2011, working on the base as the supply NCO. Criddle is currently active with the Mississippi Army National Guard in Lowndes County, serving as the property book officer for the 155 Armor Brigade.

Profile by **Grant McLaughlin** | grant@cdispatch.com



Criddle sits in a chair with his convoy on Highway 1, Scandia, Iraq. When his unit traveled on missions, it formed a convoy of vehicles, occasionally camping on the side of the road.

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