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2023**



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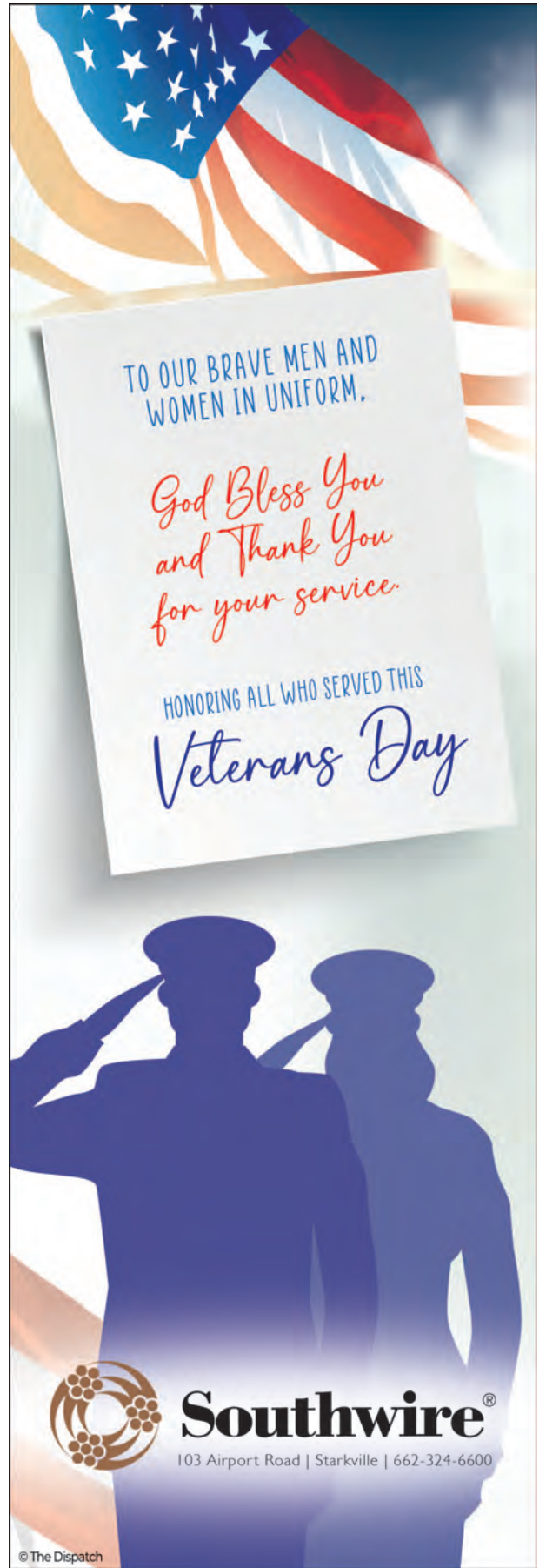
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Navy • Lieutenant

Sometimes, all someone needs is a nudge. For Lynn Spruill, it was her father and his airplane.

“He wanted me to stay busy in the summer,” Spruill said. “He had a plane, because it was something he enjoyed doing. ... He wanted me to be able to experience a lot of things, and that was one of them.”

Spruill had been flying with her father since she was a child, but around age 14 she started working toward getting a pilot’s license. That childhood fascination with flying would eventually see Spruill become the first woman to land a plane on an aircraft carrier.

By the time she was 16 she had gotten her pilot’s license, learning over the summers at a grass strip outside of Starkville. At around 18, it was off to Greeley, Colorado, for another summer of lessons, this time for an instrument rating.

“I was the youngest one there,” she said. “A lot of (the other students) were back from Vietnam, using the GI Bill to get their time and their ratings.”

By the time Spruill graduated from Mississippi State University, she had added instrument and multi-engine rating to her other accomplishments,

and she had come to the Navy’s attention.

“It was a friend-of-a-friend thing,” she said. “Somebody who knew me knew a recruiter in Memphis. They were scouring the U.S. for people who would be a good fit.”

Spruill was chosen to be part of an experimental program designed to see if women could become naval aviators. She saw the opportunity as a pathway to eventually land a job with an airline, which were almost exclusively hiring veterans at that time.

It wasn’t all pragmatism, though.

“I thought it would be great fun,” she said. “An adventure. ... I wanted to fly jets, but they wouldn’t let me do that.”

Military life definitely had its challenges, she said.

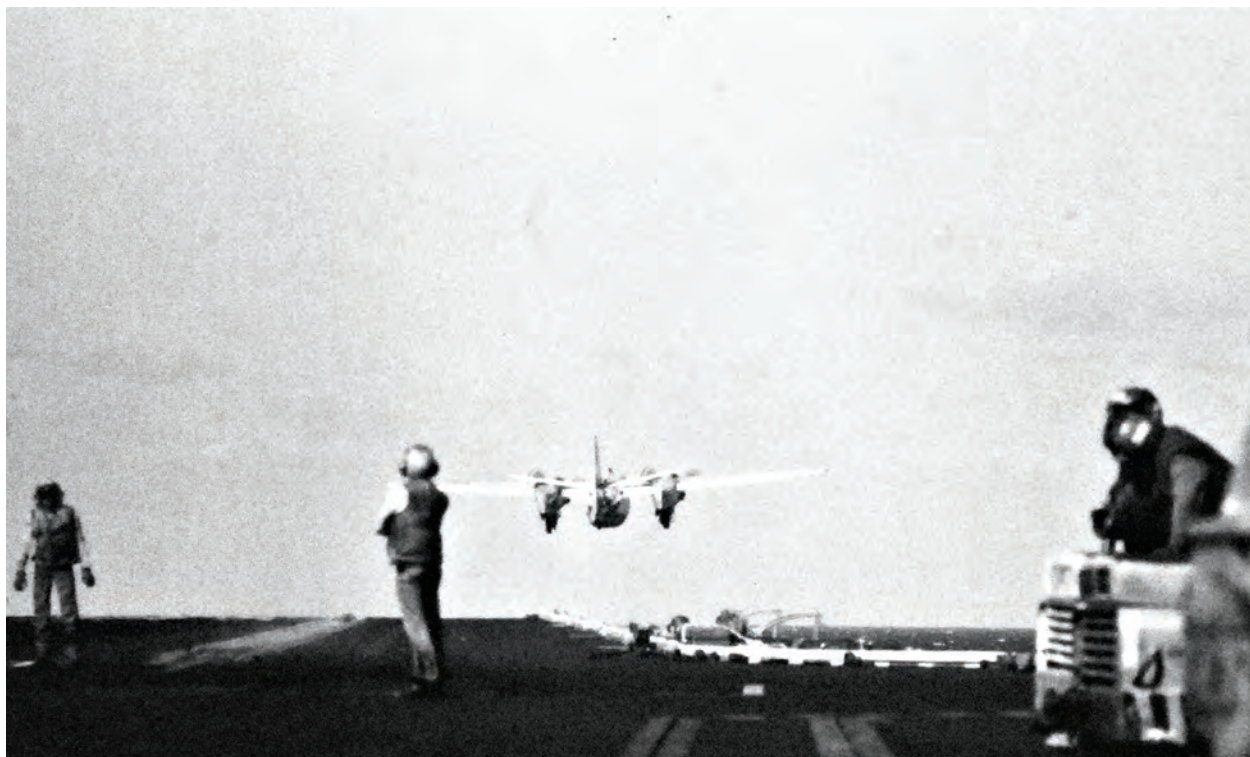
“It was an eye-opening experience,” she said. “I had not had (that) kind of regimentation before, in any sense. Doing midnight watches, uniforms, wearing a skirt with 30 mph winds blowing up your ass, marching, any of those things.”

Women were only allowed non-combat roles at the time, so Spruill found herself training alongside Air Force pilots on the C-130 Hercules, a four-engine turboprop, and then being deployed, first to Hawaii and then to the Philippines. After two years in the →



Courtesy photo

Spruill is interviewed by a camera crew after her first carrier landing. She was the first woman to ever land a plane on an aircraft carrier.



Courtesy photo

Spruill's plane takes off after her historic first landing.

Philippines, she came back to the States to begin carrier training in 1979.

"I had to change coasts to be able to do that," she said. "The west coast (admiral) said, 'No, not in my ocean.' The east coast (admiral) said he was willing to let me become carrier qualified."

Training for carrier operations involved taking off and landing on a short strip designed to resemble the deck of a carrier, she said. It would have points of reference for the arresting gear, which is the system that stops a plane landing on a deck once it touches down.

"They would have a (landing signal officer) out there to give you a point of reference," she said. "You would set up your approach to hit the wire based on his signals."

Training is fine, but "... when you actually do it yourself, it looks the same but significantly different," Spruill said. All the painted lines in the world can't prepare someone for a landing strip that is moving in time with ocean swells.

"I came in high the first time, thinking, 'Oh, s***, oh dear, this is too close,'" Spruill remembered. "It isn't like the field landing practice. But eventually you get a sense of the settling, the difference of it. It just took a little time to put it all together."

The Navy made a "reasonably big deal" of her feat, Spruill said.

"They were taking advantage of the PR opportunity associated with it at the time," she said. "There was somebody on the carrier to interview me from one of those shows that did the weekly highlights. Obviously I can Google myself ... but I didn't make

the evening news or anything."

Spruill left the Navy after a little more than six years, with the rank of lieutenant. The airlines had started hiring, and her dream job with Delta beckoned. It didn't work out, though, with hiring at a standstill by the time of her discharge.

Instead she flew corporate aircraft for Atlantic Richfield Company before finally landing the Delta job about five years later.

While flying for Delta and based in Dallas, Spruill took her first steps into politics.

"You fly, and then you don't have anything else to do," she said. "I was searching for something that both kept me busy and mattered."

Spruill got on the planning and zoning commission in Addison, Texas – a Dallas suburb – and then ran for the city council and, eventually, became mayor.

Spruill retired from Delta on Thanksgiving Day, 2004 and returned to Starkville to run the family business after her father's death. She eventually served as treasurer for her friend Dan Camp's mayoral campaign, and "after much arm-twisting" agreed to serve as the city's chief administrative officer, a position she held from 2005 to 2013 under both Camp and his successor, Parker Wiseman.

When Wiseman decided not to run for re-election, Spruill decided to try for the post and was elected.

"The military and politics are both challenging, but in positive ways," she said. "But they involve a totally different skill set."

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



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Army • Sergeant First Class

When Shannon Arick joined the United States Army in 1990, she did so with a rebellious streak. Still, she didn't think her military service would stretch 18 years and take her around the world.

"Operation Desert Shield was happening at the time, but really, I was kind of rebelling because my dad was in the Air Force," Arick said. "I was slated to go to the Air Force Academy and be an officer. The Air Force is really where my family has served."

Arick went to basic training at Fort Dix, New Jersey, in May 1990 and went to her first assignment in September at Fort Bliss, Texas, as an air defense artillery specialist, working with missiles. In 1991, though, she joined the Army Reserve.

"I was a Patriot Missile crew member and I did my advanced individual training at Fort Bliss, Texas, and then was stationed there not too long after that," she said. "I was pregnant with my daughter at the time, so I decided to go ahead and get out and join the Reserves."

After returning to active duty in 1997, Arick was stationed at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, as a diesel mechanic for the 801st Support Battalion.

In 1999, she deployed on her first overseas assignment to Camp Humphreys in South Korea as a recovery specialist for base vehicles and supplies until returning to Fort Campbell in 2000.

Then, she ranked up to a sergeant while still working on vehicles.

"Fort Campbell was a really great place to learn more about different types of systems because I didn't just work on vehicles," she said. "We also rebuilt fuel and electric systems, replaced wiring harnesses, rebuilt starters and generators and things like that."

From there, she was sent to Aberdeen Proving Grounds, a Maryland staff sergeants school, shortly before Sept. 11, 2001.

"It was a very strange and trying time," she said. "We were calling to get back to Fort Campbell to see if they would call our units back. They said no right now and told us to finish our school out."

Arick then graduated and joined a special logistics team in Kuwait in 2002 for three months for the 101st Airborne Division, handling supplies and troop movement.

"We had to handle tracking all of the supplies going to Afghanistan and coming back," she said. "When you're going into war, you want to take everything you could possibly take with you. But getting it back to the United States is a much different story."

Arick later deployed to Germany and Iraq, handling logistics from 2005 through 2007, when she returned to Fort Campbell and was promoted to Sergeant First Class, serving as a maintenance supervisor for the base.

In 2008, Arick left the Army and completed a bachelor's degree in mathematics from Austin Peay State University before moving to West Point in 2011 to work for Navistar as a military contractor.

She then worked as an engineer at Yokohama Tire from 2015 to 2020 before being furloughed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Today, she is the proud owner of Bits N Pieces, an antique shop in downtown West Point.

"The military taught me not just a trade, but really how to go through life and recognize that there really are not that many problems out there that cannot be solved," she said.

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

Army recruit Shannon Arick sits in a trench at Fort Dix, New Jersey in 1990. Shannon joined the United States Army in 1990 and would go on to serve as supplies and logistics specialists in Iraq, Afghanistan, South Korea and Germany. Over her 18 year-long career, she ranked up several times, eventually making Sergeant First Class before retiring in 2008. She would eventually purchase Bits N Pieces, an antique store in downtown West Point.



Courtesy photo

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JEREMY BAHAM

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Army Reserve/National Guard • Sergeant

When Jeremy Baham was enlisting in the military at 18 years old, he was focused on combat arms.

But after a decade of peacetime service, the military led him on a path to supporting others that he didn't expect.

"I wanted to be in this band of brothers and have the opportunity to serve like that and to stand a post and do all the things you see in movies," Baham said. "And I think as I got older and started understanding leadership within my unit, I found out what I really liked was taking care of the soldiers and taking care of my peers."

When Baham initially enlisted in the Army Reserve in 1989, he was in a field artillery unit based out of Alabama. He said he spent three years working his way up, eventually getting into a special weapons section, and then being promoted to section chief.

But with the state of Alabama downsizing artillery units during peacetime, Baham was given the option to re-train as a combat medic and to switch to the Alabama National Guard.

Baham said his training was similar to EMT training, but with a stronger focus on trauma injuries, like gunshot wounds, explosions and more.

"I think that's where I really developed this idea of needing to take care of service members and wanting to take care of service members," Baham said.

While serving in the National Guard, Baham earned his undergraduate degree in political science and a master's degree in counseling. After he left the National Guard in 1999, he also got his doctorate



Photo by Abigail Sipe Rochester/Dispatch Staff

Jeremy Baham stands in front of the flags displayed in Nusz Hall, including flags for the United States, the state of Mississippi and all of the branches of the U.S. military. Before going into higher education, Baham spent 10 years serving in the Army reserves and National Guard, training as a combat medic.

in higher education, working at several colleges and universities toward student success.

In 2011, Baham came to work at Mississippi State University. He is now the associate vice president for student wellbeing, which includes student veterans. He said today his training as a combat medic still fuels his desire to help veteran students.

"There are two things that are important to me: Taking care of the folks that you serve with – whether that's our veteran students or the staff in the center, whoever it is – and also accomplishing whatever the mission is," Baham said. "I think that's drilled into you. ... And if those are your key priorities, how do you make that happen?"

Baham said he tries to help student veterans on an individual level, as each student experiences different issues. For many, the change in structure from the military to the university is difficult. For others, going from active combat and gunfire to a calmer university life is the challenge.

"(The military) was invaluable to me in helping me be successful," Baham said. "I think that has led to me wanting to help other veterans and help them achieve ... success.

"Being able to do that with veterans really kind of feeds my soul," he added. "When I wake up in the morning, I love to come to work, and a lot of that has to do with being able to help students in general, but student veterans in particular."

Profile by **Abigail Sipe Rochester** |
arochester@cdispatch.com



Photo by Abigail Sipe Rochester/Dispatch Staff

Jeremy Baham works at his desk in Nusz Hall, the home of the G.V. "Sonny" Montgomery Center for America's Veterans, on the Mississippi State University campus. Baham is the associate vice president for student wellbeing for MSU, which also includes responsibilities for helping student veterans achieve success.

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CRAIG BARFIELD

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Air Force/Army National Guard • SFC E7

When Craig Barfield first joined the service in 1965, it was a way to follow in the footsteps of his military family and a solution to avoiding college. Little did he know he would spend a total of 25 years serving the country.

Freshly out of high school, Barfield joined the Air Force in June of 1965 as an aircraft structural mechanic. Leaving his hometown of Baxley, Georgia, he was stationed at the Columbus Air Force Base, 454th Bomb Wing.

Barfield was in the first deployment for bombing Vietnam that November. He deployed a total of three times in four years, with stations in Guam, Okinawa and Taiwan.

"I was deployed every winter. I didn't have a winter in Columbus for four years," he said. "I was always deployed to the south Pacific during the winter. My first winter back in the United States I (almost) froze to death."

Throughout his time in the Air Force, Barfield said he worked on hundreds of planes. His unit was flying as many as 33 missions a day, bombing Vietnam. He said one of the most interesting things about being in the military is the connections you make.

"In the military, it's a small world. No matter where you are in the world ... you are going to run into someone that knows you or you know them," he said. "I was in Guam one time at a ball game, and someone hollered out my name 'Barfield!' I turned around and it was a boy I was in high school with."

In June 1969, he left the service and accepted a position at Lockheed Incorporated in Marietta,



Courtesy photo

Barfield poses for a picture next to a pup tent in Fort Irwin, California, during his Desert Storm deployment in 1990.



Courtesy photo

Craig Barfield repairs a track on a tank at Fort Hood, Texas, during his Desert Storm deployment in 1990.

Georgia. He worked as a structural mechanic on the Lockheed C-5 Galaxy Series. Barfield said he had a great experience, gaining even more job experience working with aircraft.

"I got to see a lot of the world and work with a lot of great people, even after my tour of duty," he said.

In late 1982, he began working with civil service for the Air Force as a structural mechanic, working on T-33s and T-38s, along with other models.

Barfield joined the Army National Guard in 1975. He deployed for Operation Desert Storm in 1990 as well as spent six months on active duty stationed in Fort Hood, Texas and Fort Irwin, California.

"I wanted to be a part of our nation's defense program," he said. "I like the military, and it was extra money for me and my family, and it had good benefits."

He retired from both the National Guard and civil service in 1995.

"The highlight of being in the military was the camaraderie with fellow soldiers, advancement in rank, and the mindset of serving my country," he said.

Barfield worked on staff at Fairview Baptist Church as maintenance supervisor from 1995 to 2013. He frequently participates in Veterans Day parades and the veterans programs at his church. He is also associated with the Veterans Affairs Office in Columbus.

"My experiences were so great. The main thing is, our good Lord took care of me. ... I had a fantastic journey through the military and civilian jobs," he said.

Profile by **Raleigh Campbell** | *Special to The Dispatch*

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~Jeff Miller



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Get Better.

DERRICK BECKOM

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Army • Sergeant Major

Whether as a firefighter, a sergeant major in the Army or as a staff sergeant in the Mississippi Highway Patrol, Derrick Beckom's goal has always been to go where he can serve the most.

"I'd rather serve others first than myself," Beckom said. "That's the way it's supposed to be. I don't know anything different."

Beckom enlisted in the military on January 10, 1990, as a freshman in college as a way to pay for school. After school, he worked as a firefighter for the Kosciusko Fire Department from 1993 to 2003 and then went to patrol school for MHP in 2003.

Beckom worked for Mississippi Highway Patrol for six months before being called up to go to Iraq with his unit, the 2nd and 114th Field Artillery Unit of the 115th Armored Brigade.

The unit landed in Karbala, Iraq, on January 11, 2005, 15 years and a day after Beckom initially enlisted. He stayed there in an active war zone for eight months, mostly working on patrols until he and his unit moved to Camp Hit near the Syrian border.

While there, the violence seemed to increase, as the longest his unit went without enemy contact was 36 hours.

"I can remember we lost a guy the day before Thanksgiving, Thanksgiving was peaceful, and the day after Thanksgiving we lost a guy," Beckom said. "I can remember it like it was yesterday."

Following Beckom's first tour, he returned to MHP. But in 2008, Beckom was called up again for his second tour in Iraq. By May 2009, he was deployed to Mosul, Iraq. He said on the second tour, his greatest concern was making sure all of the men who were under his command made it back home.

"That's what you don't want to have to do, deliver or have the news delivered that your loved one left with me, but I couldn't bring them back," Beckom said.

Beckom said his wife Vickie and their children, Laytanna, Derek Jr., Jamie and Mariah, became stronger in his absence. But after 21 years, with his children growing up and starting to worry about him leaving, he decided it was time to retire from the military in December 2010.

While he retired from the military, Beckom did not retire from public service. Today, he has almost 20 years of service with MHP. He received two life saving awards as a trooper in 2011 and 2022.

"With the discipline that both jobs require, I think it has helped me to be humble and taught me how to better treat people," Beckom said. "... It's a uniform. I'm here to help you if I can. I think



Courtesy photo

Derrick Beckom is pictured in his Army uniform. Beckom served two tours in Iraq in 2005 and 2009, both of which brought him into combat zones.



Courtesy photo

Derrick Beckom served in the Army for 21 years, including two tours in Iraq. He is now serving the state of Mississippi as a staff sergeant for the Mississippi Highway Patrol.

both the jobs have really helped me more than I've helped it."

Profile by **Abigail Sipe Rochester** |
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CHRIS BLAYLOCK

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Army • Staff Sergeant

When Chris Blaylock signed up for the United States Army in 1993 in Clarksdale, he joined four other generations of service members in his family.

“Part of it was I felt like I needed to serve our country and to do what I could like people had done before me,” Blaylock said. “I’m a fifth-generation Army serviceman and it’s kind of a family tradition.”

Blaylock left Clarksdale for basic training at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, in December 1993. He returned to complete school and earn his truck driver’s certification for the 116th Infantry Battalion in 1994.

From there, Blaylock went to Fort Riley, Virginia, from 1994 to 1996, handling fuel logistics and truck driving for his unit.

“We were the ones making sure the vehicles and tanks had enough fuel,” Blaylock said.

But in 1996, Blaylock left the Army to work in Clarksdale and attend college. While he never finished his degree, he rejoined the service in 1999 for a two-year contract with the Army National Guard and began training as a tank crew member for the 198th Cavalry Division in Oxford.

But just a few days before his contract was complete, the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks inspired him to reenlist for another 11 years.

“I felt like, at that point, I had an obligation to help him and do my part because of what was happening,” he said.

Blaylock was a logistics specialist for the 14th Artillery Unit in Oxford until 2009, when his battalion was called up for an overseas deployment to Mosul,

Iraq. For his service overseas, he was promoted to staff sergeant.

“It was scary as hell because you didn’t know if you were coming back,” he said. “My brother Scott, he went with me. My job there was to keep track of our supplies, so I was working in logistics for the entire battery.”

Blaylock left Iraq in 2010 and was reassigned to Camp Shelby in Hattiesburg, handling supplies from Iraq back to the United States. From there, he was stationed in Oxford in 2012 and then at the Alpha Battery 114th Artillery Division in Columbus until he retired in 2013 as a staff sergeant.

When he left the military, Blaylock obtained a job with Columbus Police Department in 2015. After just a few years as a patrolman, he received his motorcycle patrolman certification and eventually became an investigator for CPD.

“I thought to myself that I had had the same pair of army boots my entire adult life, and thinking about how my father was a police officer in Clarksdale, it felt like it was time for me to get a new pair,” he said.

In 2021, Blaylock left CPD for Lowndes County Sheriff’s Office as a school resource officer in Lowndes County School District, where he works today.

“I have a mission every day to protect students and anybody that works at that school,” he said. “That’s what I’m called to do is to protect them, and to me personally, there’s no bigger honor.”

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



Courtesy photo

Staff Sgt. Chris Blaylock sits in a fuel truck in Mosul, Iraq in 2009. Blaylock joined the Army as a fifth-generation service member and served as fuel specialist, tank crew member and supplies and logistics officer for the Army National Guard until 2013. After he retired, he became a Columbus Police Officer in 2015 and went on to join Lowndes County Sheriff’s Office as a school resource officer in 2021.



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Army National Guard • Navy Petty Officer

As Ronald Brackin watched Naval ships come into port in Jacksonville, Florida, in 1962, he imagined an adventure traveling with the Navy.

Still, he couldn't imagine the places he would go or the historical events in which he would participate.

"Being a Florida boy, I liked seeing the different types of ships and the idea of getting to visit different ports, so I just joined up," Brackin said.

Brackin joined the Navy in mid-1962 and completed basic training at Great Lakes Naval Station later that year before returning to Jacksonville. At the time, he served as a seaman apprentice on the USS *Yellowstone*, ensuring the ship had fuel and supplies.

In November, he was transferred to the USS *Myles Fox* and was dispatched with his crew to patrol the Caribbean Sea following the Cuban Missile Crisis.

"We floated around Cuba and inspected boats coming into port," he said. "There was this fisherman's boat coming back to port, and they were going to go right past us. We were fixing to have to take drastic measures, but then the boat turned back and headed back out to sea."

Brackin then served as the ship's fireman and maintenance worker as it patrolled the Atlantic Ocean and Mediterranean Sea from 1963 to early 1965. During that time, Brackin was promoted to petty officer second class.

"We had to keep training up, and so they kept us patrolling from port to port," he said. "We went on a Mediterranean assignment, and we stopped in Spain, Portugal, Sicily, Italy, Greece and Turkey. When we got into port, we could go and take tours, and I visit-

ed the Acropolis in Greece, and my favorite was the Leaning Tower of Pisa."

Just six months before his contract was up in 1965, Brackin was offered a chance to volunteer with his ship to head to Vietnam, but he decided to leave the military instead of extending his contract.

"The ship would have gone on a yearlong tour around the world before getting there, and I didn't want to extend my contract at the time," he said.

Brackin left the military in early 1966 as a petty officer third class and opened his own gas station, C&W Station, in Demopolis, Alabama, before working as pulp manager at Gulf State Paper Mill in 1971.

But just a year later, Brackin felt the need to rejoin and signed up for the Army National Guard, serving as sergeant and equipment manager with the Engineering Battalion in Demopolis.

He most notably participated in a project to build a floating bridge on the Tennessee Tombigbee Waterway in 1984 for attendees to stand on during its grand opening ceremony in Columbus.

Brackin left the military again in 1994 and obtained a job in Lowndes County at the Weyerhaeuser Paper Mill as a pulp and processing manager until retiring in 2004.

Looking back, Brackin said he enjoyed serving his country and the skills he took into his civilian career, such as a hard work ethic. Though, there is one part of his service that gets in his way from time to time.

"My wife still doesn't like how I fold my laundry like how I learned in basic training," he said, laughing.

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



Courtesy photo

Petty Officer Second Class Ronald Brackin poses in front of the Acropolis while on a Naval assignment in Greece. Brackin joined the Navy in 1962 with hopes of traveling the world. During his time in the military, he explored ports throughout the Mediterranean sea, patrolled the waters of Cuba following the Cuban Missile Crisis and built a float bridge with the Army National Guard on the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway in 1984.

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LUKE BORER

Air Force • Lieutenant Colonel

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As a teenager, growing up in a small town in Ohio, Lt. Col. Luke Borer knew what he wanted to do with his life.

"I decided to go into the Air Force because I wanted to go to college in Colorado," Borer said. "I competed to go to the Air Force Academy (in Colorado Springs), and I earned a spot to go, and the rest is history. I did a civil engineering degree at the Air Force Academy, but then they asked me if I would want to go to pilot training. I said, 'Yes!'"

The third of seven brothers and no sisters, Borer was the only one who entered into the armed services. He had a few uncles who served, but it was a high school mentor who set him on the path to service.

"I had a good mentor in high school who was a World War II fighter pilot, and he's the one that really sparked my interest in joining the Air Force specifically and trying to go to the Air Force Academy," Borer said. "His name was Lt. Col. Cleetus Reymann. He said, 'I think you've got the right stuff to try to go into the Air Force.'"

Borer was stationed at numerous bases throughout the country during his 20-year career. These included: Colorado Springs, Montgomery, Columbus, San Antonio and Omaha.

Throughout, he kept finding his way back to Columbus, with three separate assignments, including his final one.

"I did my last roughly 10 years in the Air Force back in Columbus," Borer said. "I was a full-time reservist on active duty orders. I would say my favorite has been Columbus because I have basically been here almost 15 years of my 20."

However, one place that stands out to him, perhaps even more than Columbus, is Omaha.

"That's where my wife and I started our Air Force

life as a married couple," Borer said. "We bought our first house and had our 'honeymoon years' and met lifelong friends. We had our first child there. It really holds a special place in our lives."

Borer and his wife, Cathryn, now have two sons, William and Henry.

Aside from the many different places he has been, the highlight of Borer's career was being promoted and having his family pin his new ranks on him.

"When I got promoted to major and lieutenant colonel, my wife and my sons got to put my new rank on my shoulders and my hat," Borer said. "They were little when I made major, probably 2 and 4, and when I was promoted to lieutenant colonel, they were probably 8 and 10."

After a 20-year career, Borer retired from the Air Force earlier this year.

"It was just an honor to be trusted to do the things we did as a team in the Air Force," Borer said. "It was probably the best job in the world. I loved doing it and loved all of the lifelong friends we made. I am just humbled they let me serve for 20 years."

Profile by **Robert Scott** | *Special to The Dispatch*



Courtesy photo
Lt. Col. Luke Borer stands next to his T-1 Jayhawk at Columbus Air Force Base.



Courtesy photo

Luke Borer stands with his family during his promotion ceremony to lieutenant colonel. Front row are Henry and William Borer. Back row are Borer's in-laws W.C. and MaryLu Vaughn; his wife Cathryn; and his parents Jane and Brad Borer.



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

~John F. Kennedy

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STACY L. COBBINS

THE
DISPATCH

Army Reserve • Sergeant

Service isn't always about combat. Sometimes it's about educating yourself, bettering yourself and building the foundation to be a stronger, better person.

Stacy L. Cobbins of Starkville was looking to educate herself. She was a student at Mississippi State University, and finishing was very important to her – she was on the way to becoming the first in her family to graduate from college.

“During college, my parents divorced,” she said. “At the time I was hearing the commercials: ‘Be all you can be.’ I saw that as a way to finish college with the G.I. Bill.”

The G.I. Bill provides educational benefits to veterans.

Cobbins enlisted in the Army Reserve in March 1980 and skipped a semester to go to basic training and advanced individual training, before returning to finish out her bachelor's degree.

During her eight years of service, Cobbins was a materiel handling/storage supply specialist.

“When I went to Jackson to enlist, there were limits to what (specializations) were available,” she said. “That was the closest to administration, which was my focus. I wanted to lay the groundwork for my future career.”

Cobbins used her time in uniform to further her education, both formally and informally.

“Even though a lot of our annual training was around combat, it taught a lot about structure and discipline,” she said. “I feel like I am a person who was born disciplined, and I enjoy structure, so I



Brian Jones/Dispatch staff

Stacy Cobbins stands beside the flag upstairs at City Hall in Starkville. She is currently employed in the city's Human Resources department.

thrived.”

Cobbins earned a master's of business administration from Vanderbilt thanks to the G.I. Bill.

“The training, the advancing through the ranks, it all helped me in my current field,” Cobbins said. “I've been entry-level through leadership roles, and doing what it takes to advance to the next level is very much something the Army motivates you to do.”

After leaving the Reserve, Cobbins worked in human resources for Blue Cross Blue Shield in Flowood, as well as the Mississippi Gaming Commission and the Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality. She also founded her own business, The Source of Mississippi, which handled HR and accounting needs for small businesses.

Since September, Cobbins has worked in HR for the city of Starkville.

She also runs her own charity, Cups with Caring Cakes, which provides custom-decorated sweets to the disadvantaged.

“That was a hobby that developed into a charity,” she said. “I had a time when I was sick, and I thought about what I could do to help people to feel thought of. I let my misery become my ministry.”

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



Courtesy photo

Stacy Cobbins poses beside a tree at Fort Lee, Virginia. At the time she was in the Army Reserve, working as a materiel handling/storage supply specialist.



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Marine Corps • Corporal

West Point native Cooper Dixon is a man of many uniforms. Whether as a corporal in the Marine Corps or a law enforcement officer, he seems to have always been on the front lines of helping others.

“I’ve always liked helping people out, and I’ve always thought the Marine Corps the best,” Dixon said. “If I was going to put forth the blood, sweat and tears, I was going to do the hardest one that was out there, so I joined the Marine Corps.”

Dixon said he went to bootcamp in January 2000, which he describes as “quite the experience.” After boot camp, he spent time in combat and military occupational specialty training and attended Mississippi State University while in the Reserves.

In 2002, Dixon became a deputy with the Clay County Sheriff’s Office. While there, he and his unit, the 4th Battalion 14th Marine Division Lima Company, were activated to Camp Taqaddum, Iraq, where he worked as the vehicle commander for convoy escorts.

“Your average convoy had four vehicles in it, and I was the lead vehicle,” Dixon said. “You had the scout, which was the very front, and then the lead and then you had the other two behind you. But in the middle you had the convoy. So we just escorted convoys all over Iraq, delivering what we called the three Bs: bullets, bandaids and beans.”

Dixon said he spent seven months helping deliver ammunition, medical supplies and food all over Iraq. All the while, he said he felt there was a “hedge of protection” around him, as he managed his missions



Courtesy photo

Former Marine Corps Corporal Cooper Dixon stops for a photo with a confiscated AK-47 next to a truck in his convoy in 2004. Dixon served as a vehicle commander for convoy escorts during his seven month tour in Iraq, delivering supplies to bases around the country.

without a great deal of anxiety.

When Dixon returned stateside, he resumed his job at the Clay County Sheriff’s Office before becoming an officer with the Starkville Police Department. There, he continued working in law enforcement while also finishing his degree at MSU, until he fulfilled his obligation to the Marine Corps.

After that, Dixon spent a little more than three years working on farms as a break from law enforcement before becoming a deputy for the Oktibbeha County Sheriff’s Office. Then, in 2011, he started working for the Starkville-Oktibbeha Consolidated School District as a school resource officer, due to his love for both children and law enforcement.

Dixon said his work in law enforcement and in the Marine Corps were both forms of “frontline defense.”

“It takes a certain person to put on a uniform every day and put your life on the line to serve and protect... other people,” Dixon said. “I’ve found there are a lot of military people who are also law enforcement.”

In 2013, Dixon pivoted to work for the Mississippi Department of Education, where he stayed until he was promoted to the Director of School Safety, until in 2018, he left the department to start his own business, Dixon’s Safety Consulting. This consulting business includes work on active shooter protocols, assessments, workplace violence prevention and more.



Courtesy photo

The view from the roof of the barracks at Camp Taqaddum, as seen by former Marine Corps Corporal Cooper Dixon, is shown. Dixon said during his time in Iraq, he was mostly responsible for carrying supplies to men stationed all over the country.

Profile by **Abigail Sipe Rochester** |
arochester@cdispatch.com



"I've lived the literal meaning of the 'land of the free' and 'home of the brave.' It's not corny for me. I feel it in my heart. I feel it in my chest."

~Chris Kyle

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Army • Major

Born in 1961, David Harvey joined the military the day after his 18th birthday. An Army recruiter convinced him to join.

“I wanted to look for a jumpstart of what a career could be,” he said.

A jumpstart is exactly what the military did for Harvey. He went on to serve the country in different military capacities from 1979 to 2005.

Enlisting to be an electronic repairman, Harvey attended electronic school in Fort Gordon, Georgia, home of the Army Signal Corps.

“I was a teletypewriter maintenance repair person,” he said. “Those are really really old. You have to remember these are pre-computers...this is how we communicated long distance.”

In July 1982, Harvey was assigned to Munich, Germany. He said his time in Germany enhanced his ability to stay in the service.

“I saw a bigger piece of the military,” he said. “When I was in Germany, I decided that I really liked what I was doing, so it made me stay.”

With a new confidence in his career, Harvey took the steps in order to advance his rank to an officer. He left active duty to complete the Army Reserve Officer Training Corps program at Memphis State University.

Harvey spent the next 13 years deployed around the country as a Signal Corps officer. He even spent a year at the University of Mississippi teaching Army ROTC.

“I was a communications representative for different units, meaning I handled all communication matters for a unit, including radio and satellite communications,” he said.

His most memorable moment over those 13 years was his deployment to Iraq in 2003 with the 101st Airborne Division. He said it wasn't the war itself that made his deployment memorable, it was his experience with the Iraqi people.

“One of my jobs once we were stationary was (going) out to these villages, these small Iraqi villages, and we provided them with water, basic necessities,” he said. “(It was good to be) able to meet some of the Iraqi people, some of the children, and put a face to the people of that nation, versus just ‘this is a political engagement.’”

Harvey retired from the Army in 2004, and he was contracted to teach ROTC again for one year, this time at Mississippi State. Shortly after, he made Columbus his home base, working at Logista, a computer sales business.

Since then, Harvey worked as the manager of US East Operations for Central Michigan University in



David Harvey

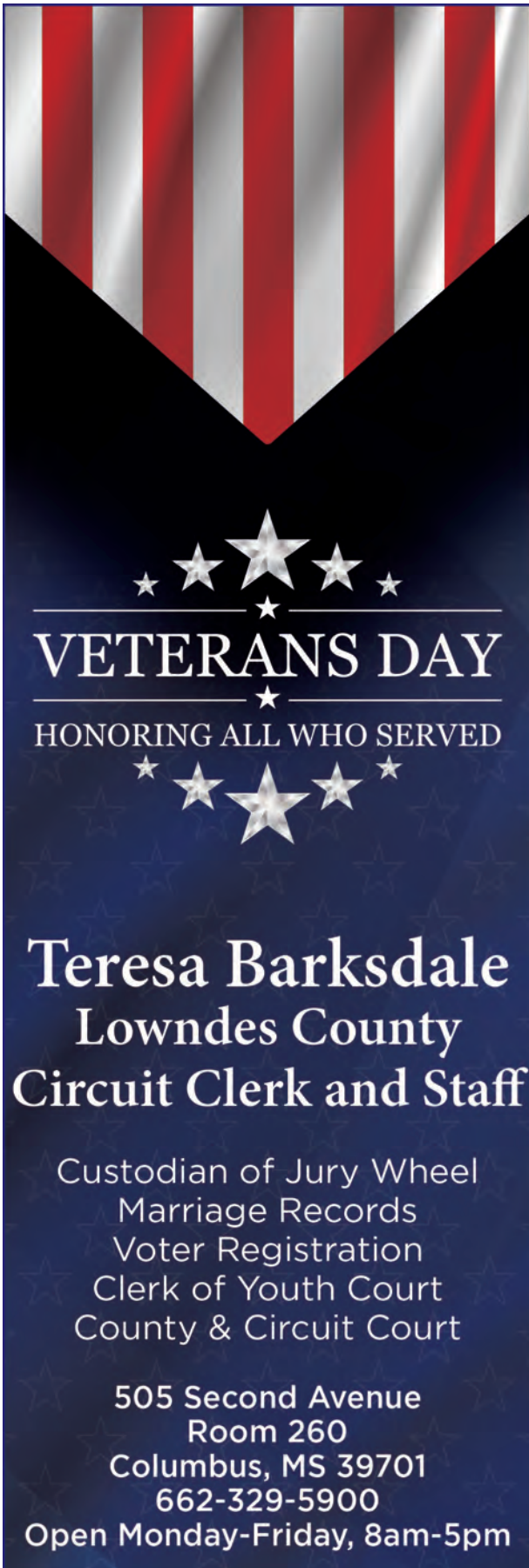
Courtesy photo



Atlanta. He retired in 2021.

From his time in the service, he received a Bronze star for his participation in Iraqi Freedom. He also received four meritorious service medals.

“We do a lot of good around the world that people may or may not realize,” he said. “And we give life basically to citizens of other countries that wouldn't have the quality of life (that we do).”

Profile by **Raleigh Campbell** |
Special to The Dispatch

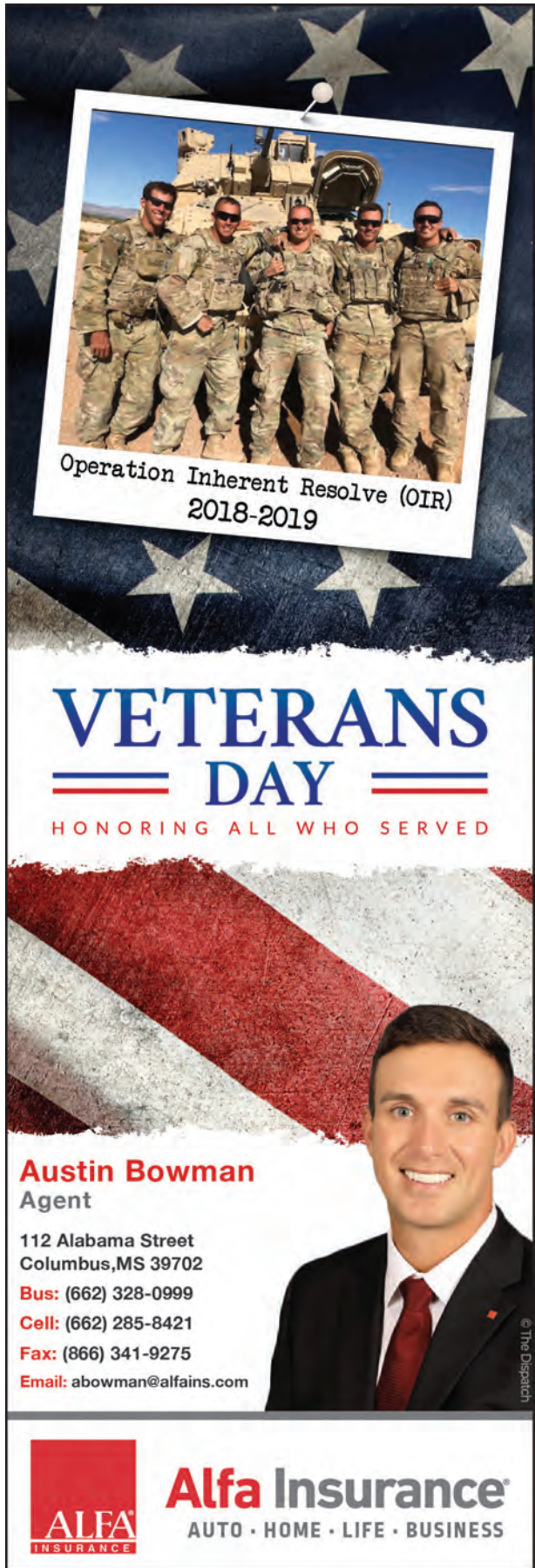




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RONNIE HASS

Air Force • Sergeant

Ronnie Hass joined the United States Air Force in 1971, signing away his civilian life for a chance to serve his country.

However, when he got to basic training at Keesler Air Force base in San Antonio, that agreement meant he received a job he wasn't expecting.

"They put you where they wanted to, not exactly where you wanted to go," Hass said. "I was trained as a Morse code interceptor to receive and send out communications that sounded like da dee da dot dee."

Hass completed basic training in early 1972 and was stationed in Istanbul, Turkey, as a communications specialist, receiving and sending Morse code messages to interpreters on the other side of his office.

"I just got the messages and it was my job to make sure the right person got them to type out the pages," he said.

While serving as an airman, Hass said he spent his free time exploring the countryside and experiencing a culture vastly different from where he grew up in Fort Worth, Texas.

"It was just a very different sort of place, but in a great way," he said. "I saw some people who wore turbans on their heads, and we took bus tours throughout the country, and it was just a very beautiful place. I even got to ride an elephant at one point."

In 1973, he was reassigned to a base in Thailand and was promoted to sergeant.

While there, Hass interacted with locals, trying foreign cuisines and visiting local parks to see wildlife.

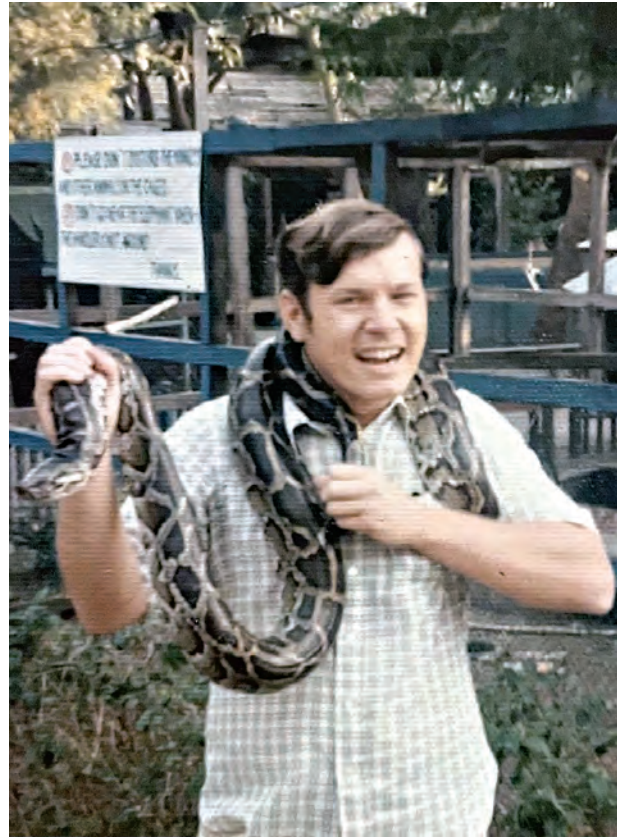
"The people there really loved Americans at the time," he said. "We would go down to the coast, and we saw the beaches and other things, talked to the people there, and we would sometimes get invited to come and eat with them when we weren't working."

Hass left Thailand to return to Keesler Air Force Base in 1974 before being reassigned to Columbus Air Force Base, where he retired as a sergeant.

"I didn't realize how the world was so big," he said. "We started traveling in the Air Force and realized there's a lot of stuff we would have never seen if we just stayed in Mississippi or Texas. So, that added to me as a person."

From there, Hass moved back to Fort Worth to work at a local factory but returned to CAFB in 1981 to work as a vehicle mechanic and maintenance worker.

"I was over the different mechanic and paint shops we had," he said. "I also oversaw the general maintenance like air conditioning units and electrical



Courtesy photo

Sgt. Ronnie Hass holds a snake over his shoulders in Thailand in 1974. Hass joined the Air Force in 1972 and became a Morse code interceptor in Istanbul, Turkey and then in Thailand. During his years overseas, he spent his free time exploring those countries and learning about their cultures. After leaving the Air Force in 1976, he eventually came to work at Columbus Air Force Base as a civilian maintenance worker and retired in 2011.

systems."

Hass would spend the next 30 years in Columbus, eventually being promoted to superintendent, overseeing all maintenance work for the base in 2009 before retiring in 2011 to settle in Hamilton and enjoy his family.

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



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BRAD MAGERS

Army • Sergeant

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Brad Magers was the manager of a cell phone store when he joined the Army in 2007. He was 33 years old.

He enlisted because he knew it was “now or never.”

“I didn’t come from a military family, but I always admired the folks in the movies and the guys around here that had served,” Magers said. “Hearing their stories inspired me that I needed to do it, so I just did it.”

After Magers enlisted, his life changed drastically. He went through basic training, advanced school and then airborne school and was trained as a missile technician before he and his family moved to Alaska for his first assignment.

After arriving in Alaska, Magers and his unit, the 4th Brigade, 25th Infantry Division, were deployed to Paktika Province, Afghanistan from 2009 to early 2010.

During that tour, Magers said he mostly did maintenance work, fixing trucks and generators that were broken, many of which were damaged by driving over rough terrain.

At the end of that tour, Magers returned to Alaska for another 2 1/2 years, where he trained with his airborne unit, including airborne jumps.

“I’m not real great with heights, but it’s different when you know you have a safety device strapped to you,” Magers said. “You get those first two or three seconds where it’s anxious ... but once the parachute opens and it’s hanging there, it’s actually pretty peaceful, just on a training jump.”

In 2012, Magers and his family were relocated to Washington. Around that time, Magers received



Courtesy Photo

Brad Magers, who served in the Army from 2007 to 2020, is pictured. Magers served two tours in Afghanistan and spent a total of 13 years in the military before working as a lab technician for Steel Dynamics.

word that he would be deployed to Afghanistan for a second time, after being promoted to the rank of sergeant.

At the beginning of 2013, Magers was deployed to Kandahar, Afghanistan, where he was stationed at the airfield for seven months. He said for most of his missions there, he acted as armed support for local truck drivers who were delivering supplies to smaller bases in the area.

Magers said he was lucky to avoid firefights during his second deployment, but it was always nerve wracking to go out on runs, as you never knew what could happen.

When Magers returned from his second tour, he and his family moved back to Mississippi a year later. In 2014, he entered into the reserves, and he left the Army in 2020.

Today, Magers is a lab technician for Steel Dynamics, where he has worked for the past eight years. He said some of the skills he learned in his training to be a missile technician has helped him with his current job, as both require him to be detail oriented. But one of the main things he enjoys is his connection with other veterans who work there.

“It was the hardest time in my life, but also the most rewarding,” Magers said. “The people that you’re there with really are what makes it special. Because whatever you’re doing, you’re all in it together, and you know your buddy has got your back and you’re all there for each other.”

Profile by **Abigail Sipe Rochester** |
arochester@cdispatch.com



Courtesy photo

Brad Magers works to fix a truck during his tour in Afghanistan from 2009 to early 2010. During this tour, Magers spent most of his time doing maintenance work, fixing trucks and generators that broke down.



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—John Doolittle



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FRANK NICHOLS

THE
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Navy • Petty Officer Third Class | Army National Guard • Staff Sergeant

Retired Starkville Police Chief, Frank Nichols, is a veteran of the Army and Navy. After graduating from Starkville High School in 1987, Nichols was quick to pursue a career in the military like many others in his family before.

Following in the footsteps of his family members, Nichols decided to join the Navy right out of high school. He described his decision to be in part because he was not fully ready for college right away. Additionally, Nichols had a love for traveling that would later be fulfilled by many deployments worldwide.

"I knew what to expect which made it a lot easier to adapt in the beginning," Nichols said. "I wanted to go into the military because I had several cousins and a few uncles go into the military before me and I've always wanted to travel."

Nichols traveled to many countries including Iraq, Hungary, Kuwait, and the Philippines. He initially served in the Gulf War and was stationed on sister aircraft carrier ships, the USS Kitty Hawk and the USS Independence during Operation Desert Shield as an aircraft director.

"I'm directing a million dollar aircraft carrier," Nichols said. "If I turn too far to the left or right it goes over the deck, and that's a million dollar plane over the deck. My responsibility level was high."

While on the ship, Nichols described the harsh conditions he and the other soldiers faced on a daily basis. They often worked 16- to 18-hour days with little to no time or resources to sleep and eat properly, he said. Nichols recalled depending heavily on his shipmates to help get him through the harsh conditions.

"You get your buddy and you stand back to back and trust them to let you take a short 2-minute nap," Nichols said. "You have to rely on your shipmate to

make it through. There's no other way. It doesn't matter what your branch is."

After his time in the Navy, he joined the Army National Guard in 1994 and served as a bodyguard for his commanding officer while traveling overseas. Proud to serve his country, Nichols said he was faced with many trying challenges during his deployment.

"We spent 15 days out in the Mojave desert for training with no shower. I still wouldn't change it," Nichols said. "I learned that I can be tested mentally, emotionally and physically, which taught me that there is a lot more to me than the guy who walked the stage in 1987 at Starkville High."

Nichols described his experience in the service as life-changing, so much so that he was inspired to join the Starkville Police Department in 1992. While he retired from the National Guard in 2004, he worked for SPD until 2019, serving his last five years as police chief.

People often perceive the military only by what they see on TV or in movies, he said, but that depiction is far from the truth and the only people that properly understand the impact of military life are those who experienced it firsthand.

"I joined the military and it was the best decision I made," Nichols said.

Profile by **Lizzie Tomlin** | *Special to The Dispatch*



Courtesy photo

Frank Nichols joined the U.S. Navy after graduating from Starkville High School in 1987. He followed in the footsteps of several of his cousins and uncles who also joined the military out of high school.



Courtesy photos

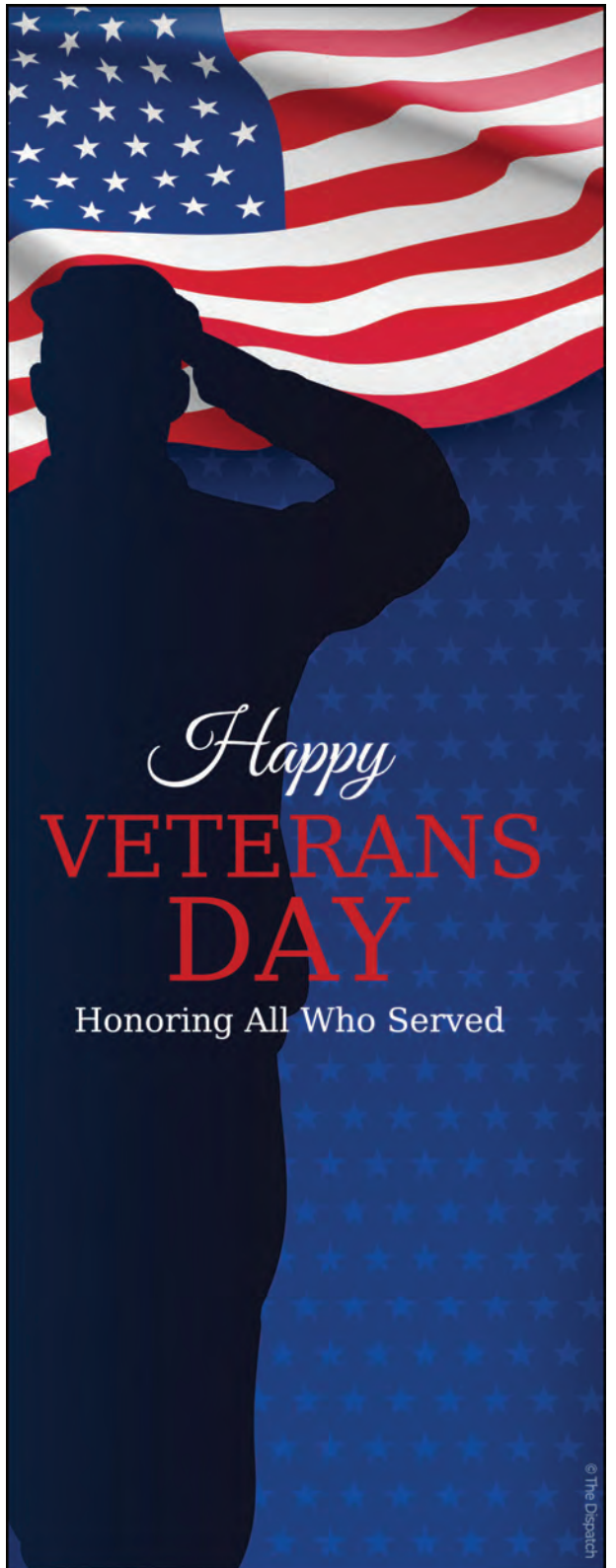
Frank Nichols served in the Army National Guard for 10 years and served as a bodyguard for his commanding officer while traveling overseas. During this deployment to the Mojave Desert his physical and mental health was often tested, he said.



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AKEEM RICHARDSON

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Navy • Petty Officer Second Class

Akeem Richardson signed up to join the United States Navy in Rosedale in 2009. Mainly because he wanted to get something other than a small-time job, he said.

Still, he didn't expect his career to take him throughout the Middle East and eventually have him serve with United States diplomats in Algeria.

"I joined for a bunch of reasons as a young man from the Delta, but I really just didn't want to go to community college and get a job, or go into the '13th grade' as it was known among my friends," Richardson said.

Richardson arrived at Great Lakes Naval Station for basic training in early 2010 before moving on to Dam Neck Fleet Training Center in Virginia to complete school for a communications and intelligence role.

"We didn't really have a whole lot of free time to enjoy the places where we trained," he said.

From there, he was stationed at Fort Whidbey Island in Washington in 2011 to handle intelligence for the United States Ronald Reagan Aircraft Carrier. Shortly after, his unit was deployed off the coast of Afghanistan, supporting Operation Enduring Freedom.

"When I went on my first deployment, I was handling communications on the ship and also doing IT work," he said. "Your first deployment is when you really get to see the world."

He returned to the United States in 2011 but was deployed to Thailand in 2014, working for the Navy's Defense Intelligence Agency as a second-class petty officer.

"Other than my first deployment, I had never really traveled too far away from home in the Delta," he said. "I was working as a defense intelligence attache for the United States Embassy until 2016. To be able to do work in support of the embassy was truly a unique gig for me."

After leaving Thailand, Richardson was deployed to the United States Embassy in Algeria until 2019, overseeing flying missions throughout the Mediterranean and handling communications with foreign militaries.

"That job was the whole shebang," he said. "Being 23 years old and four years removed from the Delta, it was a great opportunity working with other officers and the higher-ups of foreign nations."

From there, Richardson was stationed at Naval Amphibious Base in San Diego as a second-class petty officer in early 2019, handling military mission reports and overseeing base operations.

A few months later, he was reassigned for training



Courtesy photo

Petty Officer Second Class Akeem Richardson poses for a photo in Starkville in 2020. Richardson joined the Navy in 2009 to pursue a career outside of his hometown of Clarksdale. Throughout his career, he served in Thailand and Algeria as an intelligence officer, working with naval operations and foreign embassies. He retired in 2023 to pursue his own career and opened his own business, Ashed Out Cigars, in September.

to be a recruiter in Pensacola, Florida, in 2020 and then left for Starkville, where he served the remainder of his career.

Richardson left the Navy in February 2023 to pursue his own career and worked at Spring Street Cigars downtown until he opened his own mobile cigar business in September, Ashed Out Cigars.

"I don't feel like there were many other situations I could have been in that would have made me a better version of myself," he said. "The Navy gave me the opportunity to get into leadership. I was also able to be in some stressful situations and learn how to manage those situations in and out of the Navy."

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

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—John Doolittle



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TC. Rollins landed at Columbus Air Force Base in 2005, returning from his tour in Iraq, with an injury to his leg that would follow him for the rest of his life.

But Rollins said if he had the chance, he wouldn't change a thing.

"I don't regret it," Rollins said. "... Obviously, I don't walk as good anymore. My leg is swollen all the time. So (I'm) obviously... still dealing with my injuries and stuff to this day. But it has also provided me with a lot of opportunities. It's given me the ability to get an education. They paid for my law school. ... The health care I received from the VA has been top notch. I'm proud of serving and would do it again."

Rollins left New Hope three days after he graduated high school in 2002 headed for Marine Corps boot camp. He said he initially joined the Marines to become an officer, intending to serve 20 years and then retire from the military.

He attended Mississippi State University that fall, earning his degree in banking and finance. In the summers, he went to training.

But before he could make it to his third year at MSU, he was sent to Iraq in July 2004 for what was supposed to be a six-month deployment. His unit, 4th Battalion 14th Marines Echo Company, was deployed to Al Taqaddum, near Fallujah, as military police.

Rollins said he spent most of his time guarding civilian convoys. Rollins was a turret-gunner who would stand up with a machine gun through a hole in the roof defending the convoys.

At the end of the six months, however, the unit's tour was extended another month. Two weeks after the extension, Rollins said they got a mission to

escort a general from their base with six Humvees.

"We were going a lot faster than normal," he said. "We were outside of Ramadi and took a hard left and the Humvee that I was riding in rolled over. I was standing up on the roof. I got ejected from the Humvee and ended up getting hurt pretty bad."

Rollins said his pelvic bone was broken in three places. He also had a broken femur and a severed femoral artery. A Navy corpsman rushed to assist him, applying a tourniquet on his

leg. He was then evacuated by helicopter to Baghdad, where he underwent surgery, before being moved to Germany and then a hospital in Maryland, where the external fixator was installed.

By 2005, Rollins had returned to Columbus and MSU, where he finished school while doing physical therapy at the student health center. The fixator was removed about a year later. Rollins was medically retired from the Marines in 2006.

After retirement, Rollins finished his undergraduate degree and went to law school at Mississippi College. Today, he lives in Jackson and owns his own law firm, the Rollins Law Firm.

Rollins is active with the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S., and just finished serving as the National Judge Advocate General Officer for the VFW.

"I just find fulfillment from trying to make sure that these people who have sacrificed their bodies and been away from their families and all this stuff, to make sure they're taken care of," he said.



Courtesy Photo

T.C. Rollins wears a hat and pin denoting his role with the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S. Rollins is an active member of the VFW who served as state commander of the VFW two years ago and just finished serving as the National Judge Advocate General Officer.



Courtesy Photo

T.C. Rollins stands outside of a Humvee during his tour in Iraq in 2005. Rollins was injured by his Humvee overturning during the tour and returned home injured, but he has since gone on to become a lawyer and to advocate for veterans' needs to the state and national legislature.

Profile by **Abigail Sipe Rochester** | arochester@cdispatch.com



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Air Force • Lieutenant Colonel

When Carl Rotermund joined the Air Force in June 2001, he aspired to obtain enough flight hours to become a commercial pilot.

After Sept. 11, 2001, he felt a stronger calling to serve and wound up making a 22-year-long career as an Air Force pilot in the Middle East and an instructor for young pilots throughout the United States.

“Initially, it was more of a desire to make myself competitive in the airline industry,” Rotermund said. “However, Sept. 11th happened, and there ended up being a true purpose to me being in the Air Force beyond just earning flight time.”

Rotermund entered into the Air Force as a second lieutenant and began pilot training at Naval Air Station Whiting Field near Pensacola. He then completed his initial training at Vance Air Force Base in Oklahoma in 2002 and received his wings in February 2003.

Rotermund was then trained to fly C-17 cargo jets and stationed at Joint Base Charleston in South Carolina from 2003 through 2007. His job at the time was flying cargo to Afghanistan and Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom, and he was eventually promoted to captain.

One of those missions included escorting former Vice President Dick Cheney from a base in Afghanistan when an airfield came under attack in 2007.

“A suicide bomber at the gate blew himself up while the vice president was visiting,” Rotermund said. “The Secret Service came on board and told us to start our engines immediately. They escorted

the vice president on the plane, and we got out there quickly. That was a unique situation for sure.”

Afterward, Rotermund became a pilot instructor at Altus Air Force Base in Oklahoma from 2007 to 2011. While there, Rotermund said he enjoyed training new pilots and spending more time stateside with his wife, Laura.

“I loved mentoring the next generation of pilots,” he said. “From a personal standpoint, it was also nice to be home every evening and be able to spend time with my wife.”

From there, Rotermund was reassigned in mid-2011 to Randolph Air Force Base near San Antonio and was promoted to an inspector general position for the Air Education Training Command. His job then was to travel and test other training bases programs and regulations.

In 2014, Rotermund was promoted to Major and reassigned as a pilot instructor at Columbus Air Force Base until 2022.

“I became the chief instructor here and served in a variety of leadership roles throughout my time at the Columbus Air Force Base, and I did get promoted to lieutenant colonel while I was here as well,” he said. “That’s the rank I retired with.”

Rotermund decided to stay in Lowndes County after retirement and secured a job as a commercial pilot for FedEx, flying cargo jets much like the ones he flew to and from the Middle East.

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



Courtesy photo

Lt. Col. Carl Rotermund stands in front of a T-1 cargo jet at Columbus Air Force Base in 2022. Rotermund joined the Air Force in 2001 as a way to receive enough flight hours to become a commercial pilot. After Sept. 11, 2001, he decided to stay in the military for another 21 years and flew missions to Iraq and Afghanistan from 2004 to 2007. He later became a pilot instructor and inspector general, retiring in 2022 from CAFB.

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Army • Lieutenant Colonel

When Bill Tomlin enlisted in the army in December 1989, he didn't quite know why he joined.

"I don't know. It (had) great benefits, I was a kid, it seemed like an adventure. I like to give back and serve. ... But the better question might be, why did (I) stay?" he said.

As time went on, Tomlin's decision became clear to him, and a military career became his chosen profession, he said.

He enlisted in the Alabama National Guard while in Mississippi State's Reserve Officer Training Corps program, and upon graduation he became a field artillery officer.

Traveling from post to post, Tomlin advanced to a lieutenant in the 3rd Infantry Division in 1994. With a new post in Fort Campbell, Kentucky, he deployed with the 101st Airborne Division to Kuwait for seven months.

"I was a battalion fire support officer for an Attack Helicopter Battalion supporting Operation Southern Watch between Desert Storm and the Global War on Terrorism," he said. "We lived in Kuwait City and were able to travel all over the country. ... We got a good understanding on how the Kuwait people lived."

From there, he returned to Starkville in 2001 and became an adviser to the Mississippi National Guard for the next four years. Tomlin then moved to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, to attend the Command and General Staff College. He was soon deployed to Iraq in 2004 to command the border transition team.

"We trained the Iraqi border patrol, basically lived with them, on the border for 12 months, on the Syrian-Iraqi border," he said. "We taught them how to be border patrol and law enforcement."

Returning to Fort Hood Texas, Tomlin was soon



Courtesy photo

Bill Tomlin stands at his promotion ceremony at Fort Hood Texas in November 2010, as his wife Lisa and two children, Will and Lizzie, put the new rank on his uniform.



Courtesy photo

Bill Tomlin poses for a photo taken by the Washington Post on the roof of a border fort on the Iraqi/Syrian border in 2004.

deployed overseas again, including two tours in Afghanistan. In his first deployment, he served as a brigade fire support officer in the city of Jalalabad, where he did targeting and provincial reconstruction.

"We built back up their villages and tried to build their economy," he said.



Courtesy photo

Bill Tomlin rides in a helicopter in Afghanistan while assigned to the 1st Cavalry Division in 2012.

He spent his second deployment to Afghanistan as director of targeting for an area the size of Virginia.

"(Deployment) definitely shaped the way me and my family developed over time. Forty-two months was a long time over a career," he said.

Tomlin returned to Texas and finished out his career as lieutenant colonel, officially retiring in 2015 with 25 years of service.

"Being with the other service men and women, mentoring and teaching the other soldiers, all those were good times," he said.

Tomlin currently works as a defense coordinator, training different departments of defense and organizations on how to react to natural disasters, such as floods, fires, and earthquakes.

Profile by **Raleigh Campbell** | *Special to The Dispatch*

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~Arthur Ashe



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