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**THE
DISPATCH
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EDWIN BRIDGES

Air Force • Chief Master Sergeant

THE DISPATCH

When Edwin Bridges was growing up in Columbus he was always looking for a clear direction to head in life when he found out about the Air Force.

After going to the recruiter's office, he knew he found the perfect fit, and he enlisted in 2001 at age 20.

"I had never flown before," Bridges said. "I never had really been out of my parents presence for a very, very long time. And so it was different, but I was excited about it, because I knew that if I stuck to it, it was going to be able to shape me to be a better person."

After completing basic training at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Bridges was transferred to Spangthalem Air Base in Germany where he began his career loading bombs on A-10s and B-1s.

"It gave me an opportunity to see how to generate air power, and it also gave me the ability to see how this massive Air Force came together as one while we had so many people doing their part, and so it really gave me insight ... into all those things that give us the ability to live free," he said.

That insight would benefit Bridges throughout the rest of his service as he transitioned toward education, training and leadership development in 2007. In those roles, he was stationed for stints in Georgia, Texas and Hawaii.

"I think that by going to each one of those places, it gave me the opportunity to be supportive, but also it gave me the opportunity to learn how to support other people," Bridges said.

Bridges, over the course of his career, not only helped to train airmen on the same jets that he initially worked on, but he eventually moved his way up to chief master sergeant, making high-level decisions for the Air Force during his last stationing in Hawaii in 2017, he said.

It was also in Hawaii that Bridges oversaw the non-commissioned officer academy, which helped to develop soldiers for leadership development all across the Indo-Pacific region, he said.

Bridges said that through his service, he was able to instruct and teach at least thousands of service-members and his greatest hope is that he was able to inspire and generate some change in society.

"I think one of my favorite quotes is, 'I aspire to inspire before I expire,' and so that's my ultimate goal is ... that I want to go and have an impact and



Courtesy Photo

Chief Master Sgt. Edwin Bridges poses for a portrait in his Air Force uniform. Bridges worked his way up from loading bombs in A-10s and B-1s before advancing to overseeing the non-commissioned officer academy in Hawaii.

influence on other people before I leave this earth ... that was my mantra," he said.

Bridges retired after 24 years of service and returned to Columbus, where he now continues to educate and mentor at Columbus High School's Reserve Officer Training Corps program.

He is also involved in real estate developments, The Gathering Place event center and is a member of the Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity Inc.

Profile by **Braden Simmons** |
bsimmons@cdispatch.com

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MELISSA BRIDGES

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Air Force • Chief Master Sergeant

Melissa Bridges had always lived in Columbus, and she was ready for a change. Others had told her she would never make it in the Air Force. She enlisted in 2001, aiming to prove them wrong.

Bridges said she also felt called to service after the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.

“That really just struck something in me to see the things that happened on Sept. 11 and then I got in my mind that if it’s something that I could do,” Bridges said. “I could help out in this world by joining the military and giving a part of myself something bigger than me.”

Going into basic training in San Antonio in 2002, Bridges was assigned to become a medical technician, which she said was “the best thing” for her career.

Then Bridges went to Ramstein Air Base in Germany, where she began her work as an emergency medical technician in the pediatric clinic.

Bridges eventually returned stateside and continued to grow in her role as an emergency technician at Ellsworth Air Force Base in South Dakota. She was then stationed at Moody Air Force Base in Georgia and became an independent duty medical technician, which is the military’s only enlisted medical provider.

“I think the people, the technicians, the higher level technicians that I worked with, had always prepared me for something bigger,” she said. “Everything we did was a learning platform.”

After years of practice at other bases, Bridges made her return to San Antonio, where she taught new recruits in basic training while continuing her work as an IDMT until she deployed to Afghanistan in 2018.

Bridges worked in Craig Joint Theater Hospital, tending to patients, including both military personnel and opposing force members, during the conflict. Bridges said that experience opened her eyes to truly fulfilling the military’s mission.

“It was the first time that I really realized or saw how we can treat the enemy and then return them back,” she said. “And I think that really brought light to what we do as a service.”

Bridges was commended for her work and leadership in Afghanistan with a Bronze Star. Bridges said she was grateful for the recognition, but she doesn’t really like to think back on the difficulty of those times.

“I just don’t talk about it a lot, because it was a good time, but it wasn’t an easy time,” Bridges said. “I think it just means that the compilation of things

that I did helped a lot of people. I’m humble for it (and) I’m grateful for it.”

After returning stateside, Bridges received difficult news that her father had been diagnosed with Stage 4 prostate cancer. Bridges knew she couldn’t serve as effectively during that time and asked to be stationed at Columbus Air Force Base in 2020.

“I looked at it as just family first,” she said.

“It’s always family first. Because if (my) family is not good, how can I serve? Where would my mind be?”

After her father’s passing, Bridges served as a squadron leader at Keesler Air Force Base before completing her service as the group chief of Robins Air Force Base’s medical group in May.

She knew she wanted to help an underserved community somewhere in the country and realized there was no better place than in Columbus.

“God put it in my heart that I was to serve an underserved community,” she said. “I just didn’t know in what capacity, and that’s what led me back to Columbus.”

Bridges, after 23 years of service, now mentors with the Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps program at Columbus High School and with the enlisted members at Columbus Air Force Base.

“I just know God put me on this earth to serve people and to help people bring out their full potential,” she said. “... So that was a reward for me, not the rank, because that’s not my legacy. It was being able to be in places to help people and be in positions to help pull other people up to reach their full potential.”



Courtesy photo

Chief Master Sgt. Melissa Bridges poses for a portrait in her Air Force uniform. Bridges worked her way up from a medical technician to a group chief over the course of her 23 years in service.

Profile by **Braden Simmons** |
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WILLIAM “BILLY” DOBBS

THE DISPATCH

Army • Staff Sergeant

William “Billy” Dobbs enlisted in the United States Army with a friend in 1986 after deciding they both “wanted to be paratroopers and Green Berets.”

Dobbs attended basic training at Fort Jackson in South Carolina, and then went on the Army Airborne School at Fort Benning in Georgia before joining the 2nd Battalion, 20th Special Forces Group as a paratrooper.

He was deployed to Kuwait during Operation Desert Storm in 1991, where he stayed for about a year before taking a civilian break.

“(I) tied the knot, raised a couple of kids,” he said of the break. “Started coaching football and doing family things. I just got that itch again, and I had to scratch it.”

With a little convincing from a friend who was still in the Army, Dobbs reenlisted with the 101st Airborne Division, where he started teaching nuclear, biological and chemical warfare. He was deployed twice, once to Germany and then to South Korea before returning stateside.

Then 9/11 happened.

“If you’re in, you’re probably going to be deployed,” Dobbs said. “... We happened to be the first ones there, so we didn’t have the amenities like a lot of them did. ... We were staying in a tent in the middle of the desert. We didn’t have anything but water and MREs for several months.”

Because he was airborne qualified, Dobbs was reassigned to join raid teams hunting members of Saddam Hussein’s Republican Guard.

“We’d been going (on raids) pretty much every day, sometimes every other day, just depended,” he said. “We’d been getting hit by some (improvised explosive devices), mortar rounds, (rocket-propelled grenades), all kinds of stuff. We’d lost some people, like everybody does.”

On one “unlucky” day in August 2003, Dobbs suffered a traumatic brain injury, along with injuries to his neck, back, knee and hip, in a mortar blast.

“I got hit pretty good. I didn’t know it, but it knocked me unconscious,” he said. “I ended up with a traumatic brain injury. I wasn’t too lucky that day. It was a bad day for me and a couple other of my guys.”

It took a while for Dobbs to get his bearings back, but he was eventually given reserve status.

Dobbs retired from the Army in 2013. He was awarded several medals and commendations for his service, including a Purple Heart, the Army Achievement Medal, the Iraqi Campaign Service medal with two Bronze Stars and others.

After retiring, Dobbs returned to the pastime that had kept him grounded in between his deployments

– collecting Native American artifacts and fossils.

That’s what he was doing one day in 2023 when he started getting calls from a Washington, D.C. number.

“I answered and some colonel (said), ‘... You have been picked as the purple heart recipient to represent the state of Mississippi,’” Dobbs said.

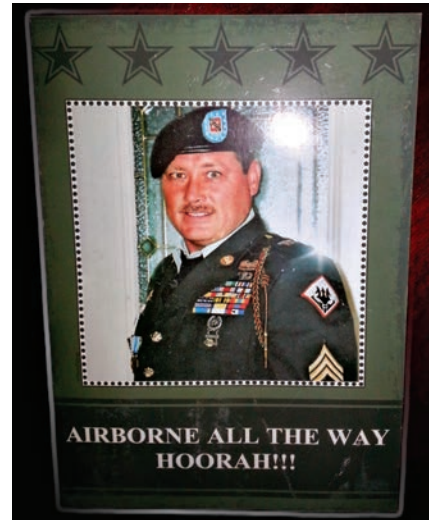
“I hung up on him, and I said ‘You know, that’s a scam.’ ... If it’s too good to be true, you know the saying. If it’s too good to be true, it usually is.”

To his surprise, he had been selected for the honor. He and his wife, Angie, were flown to New York by the National Purple Heart Mission for a weeklong trip, during which they toured West Point Academy and George Washington’s military headquarters before Dobbs was inducted into the National Purple Heart Hall of Honor.

“Isn’t that crazy?,” Dobbs said. “Just an average old joe like me from Cherokee just hunting arrowheads in the creek.”

Now, Dobbs said he is the “prime example” of military discipline and drive carrying over into civilian life, having picked up several personal projects and goals since retiring, like serving as the Worshipful Master for the Masonic Lodge in Aberdeen. He also volunteers for nonprofits like Wounded War Heroes, which provides therapeutic outdoor experiences for veterans who were wounded in combat.

“(Serving in the military) gives you character,” he said. “It gives you discipline, and it makes you a better person. And it carries on through life, and it makes you want to achieve and do more.”



Courtesy Photo

William “Billy” Dobbs served 23 years in the U.S. Army before retiring in 2013. In 2023, he was chosen to represent Mississippi as a Purple Heart recipient for the Purple Heart Patriot Project and was inducted into the National Purple Heart Hall of Honor.

Profile by **Emma McRae** | emcrae@cdispatch.com



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MELVIN GATEWOOD

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Mississippi Army National Guard • Sergeant

Melvin Gatewood remembers he was a junior at West Lowndes High School on Sept. 11, 2001, as he and his classmates watched as planes crashed into the World Trade Center.

“It really hit me. Then I went to work that night ... and I saw a Marine colonel over there. He was talking real aggressively (saying), ‘They came over here messing with us, and we’re going to bring the fight to them,’” he said. “That was kind of a motivating factor. ... I wanted to defend our country.”

So as a junior, Gatewood enlisted in the Mississippi Army National Guard. He finished basic training the summer before his senior year, and after graduating, completed advanced individual training at Fort Still in Oklahoma.

Gatewood and his brother Ronald, who was also in the Guard, were deployed to Iraq in early 2005.

“When we were over there, our day-to-day operation was presence patrol and convoy missions,” Gatewood said. “So, presence patrol can be just going through the province of Iraq, looking for whatever target may be on the list that day or just showing our presence there in the country.”

Gatewood and his team were on a convoy mission in April 2005, tasked with picking up a colonel from a nearby base. He was driving the third vehicle in the four-vehicle convoy when it hit an improvised explosive device.

“I remember my vision going from straight to upside down because of the boom, and then just really bracing myself for impact,” he said. “The vehicle hit the ground and (was) instantly engulfed into flames.”

He remembers slapping the flames down with his hand to keep them from getting to his face.

“I just remember the moans and groans of the men in my vehicle with me,” Gatewood said. “The seat belt was holding me up. ... I couldn’t calm down, and I couldn’t get my seat belt off. I remember just saying, ‘Lord, don’t take me like this. I don’t want to go like this.’”

Gatewood made it out of the convoy with the help of another soldier from Columbus, but the accident left him with severe burns and an aching back. He was eventually medically discharged. But when he returned to Mississippi, Gatewood wasn’t sure what was next.

“Really not knowing what I wanted to do, (I felt) kind of lost, feeling like damaged goods,” he said.

A friend, former Starkville Police Chief Frank Nichols, suggested Gatewood look for a job in community counseling, somewhere he could still find purpose in service. He worked in community counseling in West Point before landing a job at the Veterans

Affairs Medical Center in Tuscaloosa, starting his federal career in 2008.

In 2016, Gatewood still felt a calling to do more, so he enrolled at Strayer University and graduated with a degree in criminal justice in 2019. The pandemic unfortunately put his plans of pursuing a career in federal law enforcement on hold.

“I ended up returning back to the VA, working with primary care/mental health integration, and it’s been a joy to continue to work with veterans,” he said.

Still feeling the need to serve more, Gatewood in 2021 co-founded Operation Continue Service, a nonprofit with a mission “to remember those who have fallen while motivating those that still stand,” he said.

The nonprofit organizes memorial rucks – long distance marches during which participants carry weighted packs in honor of fallen service members – and hosts veteran coffee socials, along with generally working to connect veterans with the services they need.

“Even though we are a veteran nonprofit, and we try to do things for veterans ... a lot of times, it’s just giving the opportunity to other veterans to come and be of service, whether that’s mentoring the youth, whether that’s going on a ruck march, whether that’s giving food or clothing to a veteran,” he said. “Just serving others, you never know how it’s affecting those individuals that come and be a part of it.”



Courtesy Photo

Sgt. Melvin Gatewood, a Columbus native, carries a flag during a memorial ruck march. The marches are one activity provided through the nonprofit Gatewood co-founded to serve veterans in the community after his service in the Mississippi Army National Guard.

Profile by **Emma McRae** | emcrae@cdispatch.com

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Army • Sergeant E-5

Austin King joined the Army in 2007 primarily because he did not have another way to pay for college.

His seven years of active duty included two deployments to Iraq, and he exited the service just before his unit was sent to Afghanistan.

King grew up in Smith County, about 45 minutes north of Hattiesburg. After he enlisted, he was sent to Fort Hood, Texas, later deploying from there for his first tour in Iraq. The dangers of serving in a combat zone hit home straightaway.

“We had a vehicle behind us get hit (by an improvised explosive device) on our way to the base,” King said. “We had been in Iraq for maybe less than a week. We lost two guys.”

During that tour, King served as a field artillery scout and also was assigned for a time to a cavalry unit.

“We did a lot of patrols. I was with the commander a lot on what they called a quick reaction force,” King said. “He would sit down with local leaders in the villages, and we would be there pretty much as protection.”

During his service, he also helped out the Air Force with positioning unmanned aerial vehicles.

“I did a little bit of everything, honestly,” he said. “I did more of other things than I did of my actual (Military Occupational Specialty). I guess that’s how the military is. They put you where they want you and you figure it out.”

Shortly after returning from his first stint in Iraq,

King went to Fort Stewart, Georgia, where he was stationed for 3 1/2 years. During that time, he was deployed again to Iraq. The U.S. was trying to draw down from the conflict by then.

“It wasn’t as dangerous because we were dealing with more of training the Iraqi Army up than going out and doing missions,” he said.

Still, it was tough being away from home, he said.

“You’re in a whole different mindset over there,” King said. “I was working 12-hour days, seven days a week. So you get off, take a shower, try to call your family and put on some DVDs or something to go to sleep to.”

Toward the end of his service and with a potential deployment to Afghanistan looming, King decided to cash in on his original goal for enlisting. He used his GI Bill to earn an environmental biology degree with a minor in chemistry from the University of Southern Mississippi.

In 2017, he moved to Columbus, where he has worked ever since as a park ranger with the Army Corps of Engineers.

“Starting college at 24, I definitely had a little better head on my shoulders,” King said. “... The Army has definitely changed who I am now, too. If I’m on time, I’m late. ... I do appreciate what it has done for me. It’s opened up doors, for sure.”

Profile by **Zack Plair** | zplair@cdispatch.com



Courtesy photo

Austin King stands with a Ugandan man named Teddy at Balad Air Base in Iraq. The two worked out of a checkpoint inspecting vehicles coming to the base.



“America’s veterans have served their country with the belief that democracy and freedom are ideals to be upheld around the world.”

~ John Doolittle

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PHILLIP LOVELL

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Air Force • Master Sergeant

Phillip Lovell tore a car motor apart for the first time when he was 10 years old, and he's basically been a mechanic ever since.

"My dad was a mechanic, and so he'd change a motor out of an old car, and by the time he got home that night, I'd have the motor torn completely apart," Lovell said.

Years later, as a 17-year-old high school drop out, Lovell figured "it's time to learn something," and he enlisted in the United States Air Force in 1966.

After basic training, Lovell went to a tech school in Illinois, where he trained in aircraft hydraulics. He was stationed in Okinawa, Japan in 1967, where he received a "Dear John" letter from his girlfriend at the time, which ultimately was a blessing in disguise.

Soon after, he started writing letters to Marjorie, a girl from back home in Illinois, who babysat for his two sisters. They wrote to each other for about a year before he was stationed at Bergstrom Air Force Base in Austin, Texas in 1969, where he proposed to Marge.

"I had been in service almost three years, and I was only 20 years old," he said. "So I had to get my parent's permission to get married, which makes a lot of sense."

He and Marge were married Dec. 3, and by Dec. 27 he was sent to Tan Son Nhut Air Base in Saigon, Vietnam, on new orders, where he stayed for about a year before returning stateside to Patrick Air Force Base in the Florida panhandle.

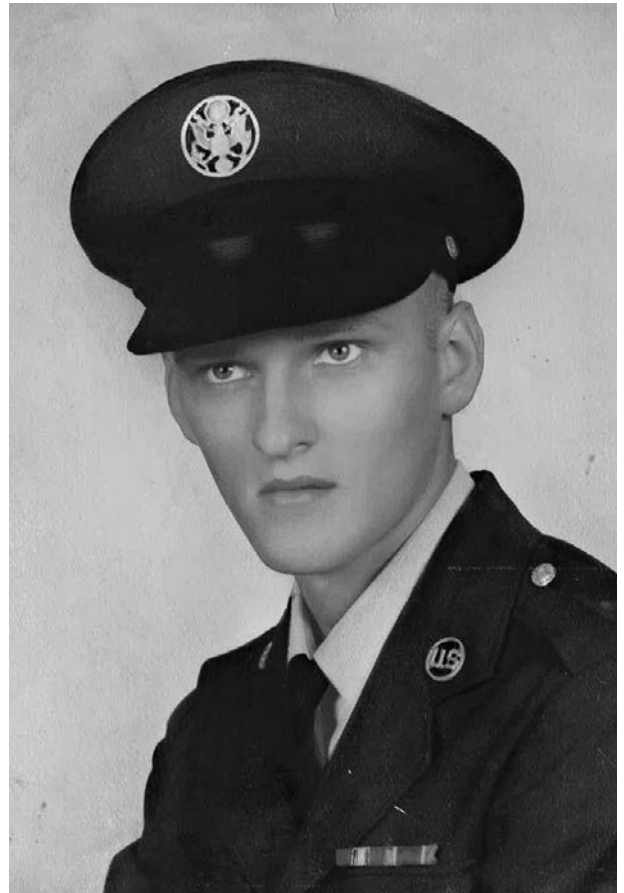
Soon after his eldest son Phillip Jr. was born, Lovell received orders to report to temporary duty out of the country. But with only 30 days left on his enlistment, he told his chief he'd reenlist only if he could return to Chanute Air Force Base in Illinois. That's exactly where he went.

He stayed there four years before being reassigned to Holland Air Base in Germany. There the family – Phillip, Marge, Phillip Jr. and their youngest son Bryan – enjoyed trips across Europe, and the boys learned to speak German.

Lovell retired from active duty in December 1987 after 21 years of service. A year later, he secured a civilian job in the hydraulic shop at Columbus Air Force Base, where he stayed for 26 years before retiring for the last time.

"I've still got a lot of friends out there and visit on the base," he said. "They keep asking me if I'm coming back, and I laugh at them. ... A lot of guys that I trained and everything else, they're still working there."

Nowadays, Lovell enjoys walks around his neigh-



Courtesy Photo

Phillip Lovell sits for a photo in his Air Force uniform early in his enlistment. Lovell retired from active duty in December 1987 after 21 years of service at only 32 years old before starting a civilian job in the hydraulic shop at the Columbus Air Force Base, where he worked for 26 more years.

borhood, moving his homemade bird feeder around his yard and taking his pickup truck to the Ford dealership, where the service members know him by name.

Looking back on his life and his service, Lovell said he wouldn't change a thing.

"I've seen a lot, and that impacts your outlook on life, when you're in places like Korea and Vietnam, even in Okinawa – the civilians downtown, if they had a job, they were only making like a dollar an hour. Watching them, how they lived and everything with how little they had, I was thankful for everything I had," he said.

Profile by **Emma McRae** | emcrae@cdispatch.com

“The willingness of America’s veterans to sacrifice for our country has earned them our lasting gratitude.”

~Jeff Miller



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JEFF MILLER

Air Force • Lieutenant Colonel

THE
DISPATCH

Growing up in Slidell, Louisiana, Jeff Miller always dreamed of flying. “I just wanted to fly airplanes,” Miller said. “I didn’t know anybody in the Air Force. My dad had flown B-24s in World War II, but by the time I came around, he didn’t talk about it much. I just thought being a pilot in a military aircraft would be an amazing thing to do, so I just tried to find out what it was going to take to get there.”

Miller’s military journey began in the Reserve Officer Training Corps at Mississippi State University in 1983 before earning an appointment to the U.S. Air Force Academy, where he studied from 1984 to 1988. Upon graduation, he was commissioned as a second lieutenant.

Then began a grueling year of pilot training at Columbus Air Force Base, after which he earned his wings in 1989.

“We always say that in college you take your exams at zero knots and two feet off the ground,” he said. “But in the airplane, pretty much every flight feels like an evaluation. And of course you’re moving at 200 miles an hour, 10,000 feet off the ground.”

Miller’s first assignment kept him at Columbus as a T-38A Talon instructor pilot, training about three students at a time – a post he initially didn’t want.

“I was super unhappy about it,” he said. “I wanted to go out and do the job. That’s why I had five years of college and one year of pilot training. ... But I made the best of it, and it’s ironic that I ended up spending the rest of my career training people and absolutely loved it.”

In 1992, Miller transferred to Dyess Air Force Base in Texas, flying C-130H missions from South America to Saudi Arabia, delivering supplies to soldiers on the ground.

“That’s one of the reasons I signed up for the Air Force, to see the world,” he said. “... It was a blast. I enjoyed traveling to different places and it’s a lot of fun on the road with the crews.”

Three years later, Miller joined the initial cadre of Air Force pilots at Whiting Naval Air Station in Florida, helping establish the Joint Primary Pilot Training program with U.S. Navy aviators.

“It seemed like since we were both learning how to fly ... why couldn’t we teach pilots the same way?” he said. “It was great seeing how the Navy did business and trying to figure out how we could make this syllabus work to train Air Force and Navy guys.”

After serving in Pensacola until 1998, Miller transferred to the Navy Reserve to instruct T-34C pilots, allowing for a more stable family life with three children. In 2001, he rejoined the Air Force



Courtesy Photo

Jeff Miller is pictured in his U.S. Air Force uniform in 2023. Miller served in the Air Force for more than 40 years before retiring in February 2024 as a lieutenant colonel. He now mentors MSU Reserve Officer Training Corps cadets through Officers Christian Fellowship at his church.

Reserve, returning to Columbus after he and his wife welcomed their fourth child.

“They had the type of airframe that I needed to fly to be at least a little competitive in the airline market,” he said. “... So we cross commissioned again back to the Air Force, which is kind of insane and not a normal career path for anybody.”

Miller served on active duty from 2003 to 2006 before transitioning to part-time status, balancing instruction with his role as executive director of Palmer Home for Children until 2011.

Miller retired from the military in February 2024 as a lieutenant colonel. Today, he and his family live in West Point, and he mentors MSU ROTC cadets through Officers Christian Fellowship at his church.

“There’s plenty of work to be done,” Miller said, “... It’s important for me to call out the young guys and gals that are out at the base. ... When they graduate in those wings, we put incredible responsibility on them. We ask them to do things as 20- and 30-year-olds across the world, with very little supervision, that have national security implications. My hat’s off to them.”

Profile by **Cadence Harvey** |
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— Peter Marshall

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FELIX MONTES

Army • Master Sergeant

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Felix Montes had just finished high school in New York City in 1985 when he enlisted in the Army.

It was a bit of a shock for Montes to leave home. Up until that point, the only other place he had been was Puerto Rico to visit family.

So when he got sent to Fort Benning, in Georgia, for basic training, it came with more than just the typical shocks of going somewhere new.

“We didn’t really get to see the city or the town of Columbus, Georgia,” Montes said. “... It was straight from LaGuardia Airport (to the base). We just went straight from civilian life into getting yelled at and getting off the bus.”

After completing basic training and airborne school at Fort Benning, Montes was stationed at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, where he was in the 1st Brigade Infantry Unit training for combat readiness. Montes said he enjoyed the peace and quiet that differed from the busy city life he had always known up to that point.

“Life was different from New York City. Everything was calm. It wasn’t the rush, rush, rush,” he said. “I did miss ... New York, but it had its give and takes.”

While there, Montes worked his way up to squad leader of an infantry platoon and spent 16 months in Korea before being sent back to New York.

Once Montes returned, he found his true passion in the Army in recruiting, which he did in New York City, and in Columbus, Mississippi with a brief stint in between instructing in Nashville, Tennessee.

“(It) was kind of one of my favorite jobs in my entire career, because I got to talk to younger kids and some of the kids that grew up with my younger brother and family, and ... I got to tell them my experience and the opportunities that the Army had given me – the good, the bad and some of the ugly stuff,” he said.

When Montes was the area supervisor for recruiting stations in Columbus, Tupelo, Greenville and Greenwood it made him realize how much he and his family loved the area, which is why when he retired from the Army in 2015 they decided to move to the area permanently, he said.

“Me and my wife and my family ... had gotten used



Courtesy photo

Master Sgt. Felix Montes poses for a portrait in his army uniform. Montes was a squad leader of an infantry platoon before eventually pursuing recruiting in the latter part of his career.

to coming to Caledonia,” he said. “... We didn’t want to move back up to New York, so we decided to stay here.”

Since retiring, Montes continues to enjoy the area and regularly teaches firearm safety classes for women and locals in the area and helps others to get certified to conceal carry. Montes also works at a gun shop in Caledonia and says that he enjoys “helping the community.”

Profile by **Braden Simmons** |
bsimmons@cdispatch.com

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BRYAN MOORE

Army Reserve • Staff Sergeant

THE
DISPATCH

When Bryan Moore finished high school in Indianola in 2007, he knew the world was much bigger than his hometown in the Delta, and he wanted to see as much of it as he could.

To that end, he turned to the Army Reserve.

“It was really to get away from home and to explore new opportunities,” he said.

In his almost 19 years of service, Moore has trained all over the country and completed overseas tours in Kuwait, Germany and Iraq.

When deployed to allied nations, Moore worked mainly in information technology, making sure the right personnel had access to the appropriate communication networks and repairing problems with communication devices as they arose.

But in Iraq, Moore was a guardian angel, which he said is “just a fancy title for a bodyguard.”

“Our mission was ‘key leader engagements.’ ... That’s our colonels going to meet with Iraqi generals because we were there to support the Iraqi military,” Moore said. “... So I would tell whomever I was escorting where to sit and where I would stand so he wouldn’t get hit with a sniper or something like that.”

These details also were responsible for knowing when to get the U.S. contingent out of potentially dangerous situations, something Moore once had to do.

“The one thing about the Iraqi military is they also want to feed you,” he said. “So we were eating, and in the middle of our meal, (the Iraqi general) gets up and two other guys walk in. They are in different uniforms. (The general) goes and has another meeting with these people.”

That didn’t sit well with Moore, who got the interpreter to ask who the strangers were. Receiving an evasive answer sat even less well with Moore, and he decided it was time for the colonel to clear out.

“Each different militia group has signs,” he said. “They ain’t afraid to show it, so it will be on their vehicles. As I’m leaving, I see their vehicle, take a picture and I get the intel back to our intelligence division.”

Intelligence confirmed the vehicle logo was associated with a militia group.

Since 2022, Moore has transitioned to drill sergeant, training new soldiers at basic training as well as helping prepare new crops of drill sergeants before they go to academy.

Only the top 10% of performers on the Non-Commission Officers Evaluation Report – which include physical training tests, shooting, discipline and other metrics – are eligible to be drill sergeants.

The payoff for serving in that role, Moore said, is worth it.

“You take 1,000 regular people who don’t know



Courtesy photo

Staff Sgt. Bryan Moore stands decked out in tactical gear. As a member of the Army Reserve, he has served three overseas tours and has spent the last three years as a drill sergeant.

anything about parade rest, position of attention, marching, don’t know anything about military rank or structure, and you watch these people – from your guidance – transition from a civilian to a soldier in 64 days,” Moore said. “... It’s like raising a child.”

He admits being a drill sergeant isn’t entirely as it is portrayed in popular culture. But some parts are similar.

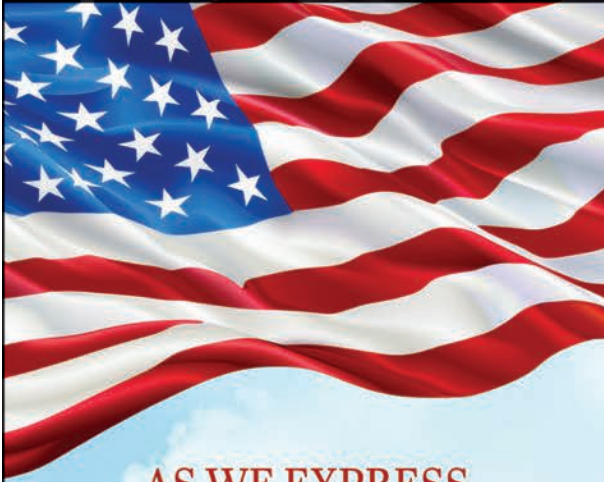
“When I take my drill sergeant hat off, I talk to them,” he said. “I allow them to communicate with me about issues they are having. Once my hat goes back on ... do some push-ups.”

For his day job, Moore is an officer with Columbus Police Department, where he also commands the Special Weapons and Tactics unit.

He will hit 20 years of service time in the Army Reserve before his 40th birthday. After that, Moore plans for two weekends a month and two weeks a year to get a lot freer.

“It’s probably going to be weird,” he said about the prospect of retiring from the service. “I’ll miss making lifelong connections with people.”

Profile by **Zack Plair** | zplair@cdispatch.com



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HUNTER PARKER

THE
DISPATCH

Army • Sergeant

Hunter Parker growing up didn't have any immediate family members in the military, but he heard the stories of his distant relatives' sacrifices in conflicts like World War II and the Vietnam War.

Those stories instilled in him an aspiration to join the military. At age 17, Parker enlisted in the National Guard.

"I just kind of felt like I had an obligation," Parker said. "... Somebody's got to do it, and I always felt like somebody's got to do it. I'd rather (it) be me than somebody else."

Joining the National Guard was the only way his parents would sign on for him to enlist before he was 18. Parker was serving as a military police officer in Clinton until the events of 9/11 changed his duty.

Parker deployed to Afghanistan with the 101st Airborne Division and served as a combat military policeman and was a driver on missions. Parker, during his first deployment, was also sent to Guantanamo Bay to deal with detainee operations until 2003 when he returned home.

While Parker enjoyed his time back stateside, he wanted to be deployed again.

"I'd come home and be like, 'Man, I'm ready for deployment,'" Parker said. "And then a deployment happens. Then all of a sudden you get a phone call telling you to go somewhere and do something. It's simplistic, but it's all you know."

Parker in 2003 was called back to service for the invasion of Iraq, where his previous experience as a combat MP would be put to work again. This time as a gunner on combat missions for his crew before he was eventually promoted to sergeant and became a squad leader after a year of service.

After returning home again to his home of Natchez, Parker became a patrol officer with the Natchez Police Department and served with them until he was deployed to Iraq for his final tour in 2007.

Parker served not only in combat missions during his third deployment but also in training the Iraqi police force officers at an academy the Army had set up to stabilize law enforcement.

When Parker returned to Natchez in 2008, he didn't realize it would be his last time serving in the military. In fact he had every intention of deploying again in 2011, but when he was filling out the paperwork for deployment he was told he had already been medically discharged because of an injury he sustained in 2008.

"I didn't find out that I got medically discharged until I was in processing to go back on active duty



Courtesy photo

Sgt. Hunter Parker poses for a portrait in his army uniform. Parker was a military police officer for the Army and served in multiple deployments to Afghanistan and Iraq.

(and) they're like, 'Hey, you've been medically discharged for six months,'" he said.

So Parker took his skills and did what he knew best after serving as a military police officer for all those years.

Parker returned and continued his service in the civilian sector as a Natchez police officer until 2010. Afterward, he served stints in law enforcement for the Adams County Sheriff's Office and the Mississippi State University Police Department. He has served in the Lowndes County Sheriff's Office since 2015 and has worked his way up to the rank of sergeant a second time.

"I wouldn't be a cop if I didn't become an MP," he said. "I was like any young kid, you don't really know what you want to do. ... I didn't want to be an MP. I, honest to goodness, did not want to be an MP. I wanted to go like my family before me, and go and do something else, in the military. ... (But) MPs do a lot. They're not just cops."

Along with serving in the LCSO, Parker also officiates during his free time for public and private volleyball, baseball and softball games, which he said was also something he had been looking forward to doing for a while.

Profile by **Braden Simmons** |
bsimmons@cdispatch.com



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TODD POOLE

Army • Specialist

THE
DISPATCH

When the firing pin on the morning cannon froze on the North Korean border, Todd Poole pulled harder, snapping his finger in the process.

He still remembers walking the frozen path of the Imjin River in full gear and seeing fellow soldiers fight frostbite on their fingers and toes.

“Korea is bitter cold,” Poole said. “... During the summertime, it’s like being out in Mississippi. ... It’s sweltering heat. ... and then when it freezes, it’s like the air freezes as you’re breathing in, like you’re breathing in ice crystals.”

Just a year earlier, Poole was a student at Columbus High School when the Sept. 11 attacks spurred him to drop out, get his GED and join the Army.

He enlisted at 17 and completed 14 weeks of basic training after his 18th birthday at Fort Benning, Georgia, graduating June 14, 2002.

His first duty station was in Baumholder, Germany, followed by a deployment to the United Nations Command Security Battalion on the border of North Korea. There, he patrolled roughly 30 miles, working alongside Republic of Korea soldiers as an infantryman and arms room caretaker.

After leaving Korea in July, Poole was reassigned to Baghdad, Iraq.

His unit joined coalition forces tasked with policing the capital city. Their mission included detaining former Ba’ath Party leaders, securing weapons and restoring order after the invasion.

Poole was retasked as an intelligence analyst and was responsible for locating targets, many of whom were depicted in the “52 Most Wanted” playing cards, given to U.S. troops.

“Those are the faces, the names and the people we were searching for,” Poole said, gesturing to the splayed deck.

Former president of Iraq Saddam Hussein is among the 52 faces in the deck.

“I got to experience a lot of things that I never prepared myself for, a lot of those things I can’t really talk about,” Poole said. “... I was just selected for something that I knew nothing about. I kept to myself ... searching for all these people. It took me a while to find a lot of them. There’s a lot of stuff I never found.”

Poole’s unit had just made the four-day trek to Kuwait when the U.S. Marine Troops lost control of Fallujah in 2004. He was sent right back into Baghdad to help stabilize nearby areas.

At no point, though, did Poole want to give up.

“I wanted to go to the top, best of the best,” Poole said. “I have no quit in me. I come from a rough



Courtesy photo

Todd Poole enlisted in the Army at age 17 after witnessing the Sept. 11 attacks on the World Trade Center. He served along the North Korean border as an infantryman and in Baghdad as an intelligence analyst before being discharged in January 2005.

background. I wanted to change my stars. I wanted to change my life, and that’s where I went. That was my entire thing.”

In total, Poole served two years, 11 months in combat. He was discharged in 2005 after a short leave of absence following an explosion which left severe injuries to his shoulder and clavicle.

Since returning home to Columbus, he has served with the Lowndes County Veterans of Foreign Wars as a senior vice commander where among other duties, he advocates for veterans’ mental health.

“I’m trying to ... do as much as I can for the mental health issues that these soldiers are going under, because it was people like me that sent them to do those jobs,” he said. “... I developed those targets. ‘This is your mission. Go kill.’ And that’s what they did. And they have to live with those actions, but I have to live with sending them there.”

Profile by **Cadence Harvey** |
charvey@cdispach.com

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JOHN ROBERTS

Army • Sergeant First Class

THE
DISPATCH

Growing up, John Roberts had three brothers who served in World War II. After hearing stories from their service days, he felt called to enlist.

At age 16, Roberts enlisted in the Army with the help of his father's signature.

Roberts first went through basic training at Fort Jackson in South Carolina, where he experienced long hours working in the kitchen at the mess hall cleaning pots and pans for about 2,000 soldiers who came through to eat.

"I had to wash pots and pans the first day I was there at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, in basic, and my hands looked like prunes," he said. "(After) 24 hours, I was so tired, but that was part of it."

After completing basic training, Roberts was sent to Fort Belvoir in Virginia and was trained in engineering, earning the title of private and becoming an assistant platoon sergeant. He rose to the rank of platoon sergeant at 20 years old.

"I took over ... as a platoon sergeant ... with 60 men under me," Roberts said. "Now, a 20-year-old can't cut a yard or wash a car."

Roberts was promoted to sergeant, and in 1951, he was called overseas to serve in the Korean War. He was assigned to the 38th Infantry Regiment with the 2nd Infantry Division and led another 60 men under his command. While in Korea, he fought in four major battles.

Roberts said that he credits his instincts and his faith in God for seeing him through the battles overseas.

"God was looking after me and making my decisions, and I have to take the bad with the good," he said.

After returning home in 1952, Roberts served in the 6th Army Honor Guard at Fort Ord, California, and helped to bury soldiers who had died during the Korean War, he said.

Roberts also served stints at bases in Japan, Kansas and Georgia before being called to service once again in 1966 for the Vietnam War.

Roberts served as an engineering platoon sergeant in the 1st Infantry Division during the Vietnam War. Roberts and his team oversaw road construction as well as other infrastructure construction for soldiers and their convoys during the war, he said.

"(We used) chainsaws and axes and everything to cut timbers and haul them to build that road, and that convoy was coming in at around five o'clock in the evening, probably at least 100 vehicles were coming in," Roberts said. "So we got the material we needed. We went out there and we built it."



Courtesy photo

Sgt. First Class John Roberts poses for a portrait in his Army uniform before being deployed to the Vietnam War. Roberts served more than 20 years in the Army in both the Korean and Vietnam conflicts.

Roberts served in Vietnam until 1967 and was awarded two Bronze Stars for his bravery and efforts during the conflict, he said.

"A few men get one Bronze Star in the military, but I got two and it's the 10th highest award that you can get in the military," he said.

When he returned, Roberts was stationed at Fort Benning in Georgia, where he taught at the engineering school before retiring after 20 years of service in 1968.

Roberts was recognized for his service with several awards, including six good conduct medals, a Vietnam Campaign Medal, a Korean Service Medal and four Army commendation medals.

After retiring from the Army, Roberts was a deputy game warden in Georgia for several years before working in commercial mowing and yard care. He also owned a full-service station in Hamilton and Aberdeen.

Roberts, now 94, still enjoys staying active and doing workouts three times a week.

Profile by **Braden Simmons** |
bsimmons@cdispatch.com

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RICKEY STURDIVANT

THE
DISPATCH

Army • Chief Warrant Officer 5

Rickey Sturdivant joined the Army looking for more out of life than his hometown of Columbus had to offer.

“Honestly, there weren’t a lot of other options as far as career advancement,” Sturdivant said. “So I chose it because I wanted to do something different than what was available to me there in Columbus. I wanted to travel and do different things.”

He enlisted in 1984 and completed basic and advanced individual training at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, before moving to Fort Huachuca, Arizona, for military intelligence training.

His first assignment took him to Fort Ord, California, in 1984, where he was deployed to Germany with the Berlin Brigade from 1987 to 1989.

“I left there a month before the wall came down,” Sturdivant recalled. “I still have a piece of it.”

From California, he was stationed in Fort Bliss, Texas, and deployed to Saudi Arabia and Kuwait during Operation Desert Storm. As an intelligence analyst, most of his work was done behind a computer, providing information on enemy capabilities and locations to infantry soldiers on the ground.

In 1992, Sturdivant transitioned to the Mississippi National Guard and returned to Columbus, where he began a 15-year career with the Columbus Police Department, rising to the rank of lieutenant.

But the call to serve overseas came once again.

He deployed to Iraq in 2003 and Baghdad in 2009, where his unit operated out of one of Saddam Hussein’s former palaces repurposed as a military base.

While on base defense duty for a special operations unit in Fallujah, he and fellow engineers came under attack.

“They were shooting mortars at us, and it was like something out of the movies,” Sturdivant said. “We’re running and trying to get ahead of it. They’re shooting behind us. You have those incidents ... and you realize how blessed you are to make it through, especially me being deployed five times.”

It was while troops were under attack during his 2012 deployment to Helmand Province, Afghanistan, where Sturdivant met Prince Harry, who was serving with the British Army. The following year, he returned to Afghanistan to assist in operations supporting the retrieval of Private First Class Bowe Bergdahl, who had been missing for about five years.

Over the course of five combat deployments, Sturdivant earned a Combat Action Badge, along with more than 15 other awards for his service.

Today, he serves as a senior intelligence adviser for the Army Reserve at Fort Belvoir, Virginia,



Courtesy photo

Rickey Sturdivant joined the Army in 1984 and went on to serve in five combat deployments, earning himself a Combat Action Badge. After four decades in uniform, Sturdivant currently serves as a senior intelligence adviser for the Army Reserve at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, and was promoted in October to chief warrant officer five at the Pentagon, the highest rank achievable for a warrant officer.

helping to shape national policy on how the reserves utilize and govern military intelligence. He is also completing his Bachelor of Science in Operational Leadership and Learning at the University of Louisville and is set to graduate this December.

This month, Sturdivant was promoted to chief warrant officer 5, the highest rank attainable for a warrant officer. After more than four decades in uniform and a 15-year career in law enforcement, he plans to retire within the next two years and hopes to write a book about the Buffalo Soldiers, the famed African American regiments who served after the Civil War.

Photo by **Cadence Harvey** | charvey@cdispatch.com



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JEFF TURNAGE

Marine Corps • Captain

THE
DISPATCH

With a retired Navy captain for a father, Jeff Turnage's path to military service seemed almost inevitable, though his father wasn't thrilled when he chose the Marines.

"He was Navy, and all the armed services had little rivalries," Turnage said, laughing. "... When I was in high school, on my way to and from school, I'd pick up a sailor hitchhiking, and they'd get in the car and say 'I can't wait to get out of the damn Navy.' Then I would drive through the gate, which was guarded by marines, and ... they impressed me more."

During the summers of his sophomore and junior years at College of Charleston, Turnage attended Officer Candidate School in Quantico, Virginia. After graduating, he completed six months of basic training and infantry officer school before being stationed at Camp Pendleton, California, in late 1983 as a platoon commander.

His service took him across the Pacific to Okinawa, Japan, South Korea and the Philippines for warfare training.

"In Okinawa, it's a triple canopy jungle, so it was all jungle warfare training," Turnage said. "In (1984), nobody ever thought about desert warfare. We were still thinking about Vietnam ... so we did a lot of hand-to-hand combat training, marksmanship training (and) how to do a raid on an objective."

Turnage still remembers the bitter cold of South Korea in December and the challenge of keeping his platoon from getting frostbite.

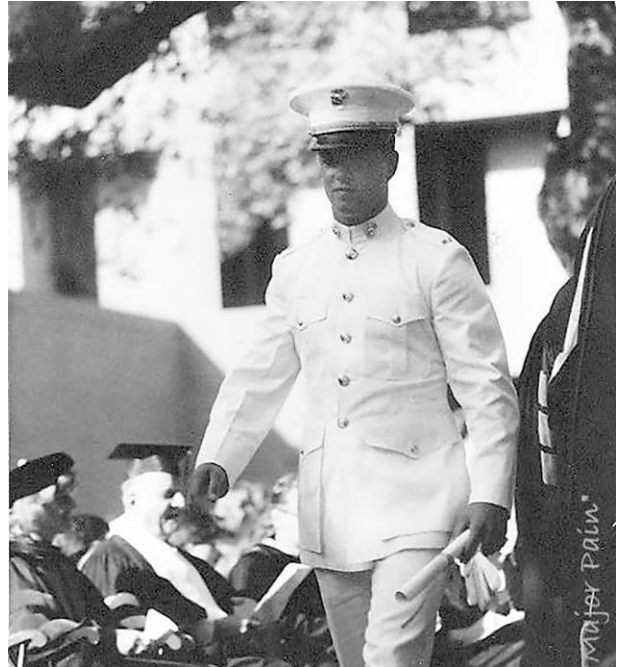
Traveling from Japan to Korea, his unit rode in a flat-bottom tank transport ship that pitched violently with every wave. Turnage recalled standing in the bottom of the ship teaching a tactical concept while the ship rocked back and forth, sliding his easel and platoon along with it.

"By the time I talked for about 10 minutes, everybody was throwing up and I was left talking to one guy," he said. "And when you get off the ship, you still can't walk right for a couple of hours."

After six months overseas, Turnage returned to California, where he became a company executive officer, then company commander overseeing three platoons. In 1986, he joined the Marine Reserve artillery unit in Jackson, serving as a forward observer and later a battery executive officer.

"We did multiple 25-mile hikes wearing a full combat load in eight hours, and I did it fine, although my back still hurts today," he said.

At the same time, Turnage studied law at The University of Mississippi. One weekend each month, he drove from Oxford to Jackson to train with his unit,



Courtesy photo

Pictured is a photo of Jeff Turnage at his 1982 graduation from College of Charleston. During the summers of his sophomore and junior year, Turnage attended Officer Candidate School in Quantico, Virginia. After graduating, he completed six months of basic training and infantry officer school before beginning his military career in the U.S. Marine Corps.

often spending sleepless nights in field exercises before returning to class Monday morning.

"About a year-and-a-half into law school, I couldn't maintain that anymore," he said. "I was trying to make good grades, and that was very difficult."

Turnage left the military in 1991 before graduating law school the following year. Upon graduation, he accepted a position at Mitchell McNutt law firm in Columbus, where he lives with his wife and dog. He became general counsel for the city in 2005 and now serves as in-house counsel.

"I would say service is not for everybody," Turnage said. "... I didn't have a great deal of aspirations. Academically, I could give a damn if I made anything higher than a C, and a lot of it, I think was confidence. But after six weeks in Officer Candidate School, I thought there was nothing I couldn't do. It was really good for me, but I don't think it would have that effect on everybody."

Profile by **Cadence Harvey** |
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CLIFF TYLER

Army • Captain

THE
DISPATCH

When Cliff Tyler looks back on his years in uniform, one word rises above the rest: camaraderie.

“We’d share misery when we were out in the boonies,” he said. “We were buddies because we’d been through hell together, bunch of guys out there marching, drilling, going on maneuvers. We really took up for one another. Comrades in arms, I guess you’d say.”

After earning his degree from Mississippi State University in 1969, Tyler was staring down the draft. Rather than waiting, he signed up for the Army, going through basic training at Fort Polk, Louisiana, and then advanced training at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri.

After training, he attended Officer Candidate School at Fort Benning, Georgia, enduring six months of infantry training that started with about 250 candidates and ended with just 96 graduates. He graduated from his training in 1970.

Then came jump school, three weeks of parachuting that nearly ended his military career before it began.

“It was windy that day,” Tyler said. “The sergeant down below had a bullhorn, but I couldn’t hear him properly. I slipped the wrong way and came down at the base of the tower.”

The tower, a 250-foot relic from the 1933 World’s Fair, stood over a layer of sawdust spread thin over concrete. Tyler broke his foot on impact.

He was first sent to his hometown of Columbus before going to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, to recover. After just a few months, he returned to Fort Benning and earned his wings, then was sent to Fort Bragg once more, where fate intervened at an officers’ club.

“I looked across the dance floor one evening and I saw what I thought was a damsel in distress,” Tyler said. “I came over and asked her to dance, and when the music was over, she wouldn’t give me her telephone number. Well I snuck over to her friend and got it that way, and that began a 53-year marriage.”

As the two began dating, Tyler volunteered to ship off to Vietnam.

“Me and this second lieutenant were picking up pine cones on Smoke Bomb Hill, and we said, ‘Heck, we oughta just go to Vietnam.’”

So he did. He spent nearly a year in Saigon with the Army’s Special Forces training South Vietnamese Green Berets in water operations and jungle warfare.

“I went up to a place called Quang Tri, right on the North Vietnamese border,” he said. “We had guys parachuting into North Vietnam or being lowered in



Courtesy photo

Pictured is a photo of Cliff Tyler in his Green Beret National Guard uniform. Tyler joined the Army in 1969, traveling to Missouri, Louisiana, Georgia and Vietnam before returning home in 1972 and retiring from the military in 1978.

from a helicopter. ... They’d come back, jump over the fence and put down the coordinates, and we’d napalm the hell out of it.”

It was “tough business,” Tyler said. After about 11 months in Vietnam, he returned home in February 1972 and married his sweetheart soon after.

Civilian life took him into management with Sears, where he worked across the south while earning his master’s degree from Delta State University. He joined a Green Beret National Guard unit in Columbus, driving monthly from Greenville for drills and jumps.

In 1978, Tyler left the Guard when he moved to Atlanta to begin a 44-year career with Merrill Lynch, an investment management company. Today, he and his wife are both retired and live in East Cobb County, Georgia.

Profile by **Cadence Harvey** |
charvey@cdispach.com



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PAUL VEGA

Air Force • Master Sergeant

THE DISPATCH

About a month after marrying his wife Deborah, Paul Vega enlisted in the Air Force in 1977, having been inspired by his father-in-law, who was retired from the Army.

“That’s a good profession, to defend your country,” Vega remembers thinking. “I thought I’ll just stay a term. I wound up staying a whole career.”

Vega went on to basic training, then cross trained as a nuclear weapons specialist and, primarily, in air traffic control.

During his 23-year career, Vega was stationed at various bases across the states, including Moody Air Force Base in Georgia, Randolph Air Force Base in Texas and Keesler Air Force Base in Biloxi.

From 1989 to 1990, Vega was stationed in the Arctic Circle, tasked with monitoring and defending the air defense identification zone – the airspace that requires all entering aircraft to provide identification for national security purposes.

Vega was standing in the air traffic control tower one night when it was 84 degrees below zero outside when the weight of his mission came over him.

“I looked at our southern hemisphere, and I realized, here I am awake, and my wife and kids and everyone else at the lower 48, they’re all sound asleep not knowing that ... there’s people standing guard to guard their freedoms,” he said.

Not just the Air Force, Vega added.

“The Navy’s out there, Coast Guard, Army and Marines (are) all working together to keep everybody safe, and the people don’t even realize what it takes so they can enjoy their freedoms,” he said.

But that doesn’t take away from the experience, Vega said. If he were to boil his military career down to one moment, that would be it.

“Being in the military means much more than just an adventure or a pay,” he said. “It’s a matter of pride you take in one’s country.”

Serving came with sacrifices for Vega, mainly being separated from his three children and his wife, who Vega described as his “backbone” during service.

“Believe it or not, my wife came to visit me when no spouses were allowed,” he said. “She just showed up. There was a village there, a small ... village there,



Courtesy photo

Paul Vega and his wife Deborah pose for a photo in 1985. Vega recalls Deborah surprising him on base once when he was stationed in the Arctic Circle.

so she took the flight to that village, but then came to the base. So she was the only wife that’s ever been to a remote site.”

In 1990, Vega was reassigned to Columbus Air Force Base, where he served as the chief of air traffic control tower operations, moving he and Deborah, and their three kids to the city that would soon become home.

The family has remained in the area since Vega retired in 2000 due to a service related injury. A big fan of small towns, Vega said he’s grown to love the Friendly City.

“We’ve grown to love the people and the place,” he said. “We like going to Walmart and people say, ‘Hey, how are you doing?’ In big cities, you’re lucky if you ever meet anybody there that you know. Here, you know people everywhere. I kind of like that feeling, one big family.”

Profile by **Emma McRae** | emcrae@cdispatch.com

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