

A salute to the veterans

Written by Helen Kaverman
Saturday, November 24, 2012 1:25 AM -

During the past few weeks, I have had the honor of talking to several veterans. Some are willing to tell their stories; others prefer to just forget most of it. I'd like to relate some of their experiences with you.

Last week, the Veteran's Day Program for the students of Fort Jennings School came to the Memorial Hall to tour the Veteran's Museum and listen to Retired Chief Petty Officer Randy Gasser relate some of his experiences. The high school students came in the morning and the elementary grades were bused over in the afternoon.

Randy came in his dress blues, which was very impressive. He explained many of his badges and medals to them. Students were very interested and asked many questions.

Chief Gasser retired in February 2012, concluding a career of 26 years of service in the Navy and to the nation. He enlisted in the US Navy's Delayed Entry Program in September 1981 and then reported to Boot Camp at the Great Lakes Training Center in Chicago in January 1982. His first experience at sea was on the USS Guadalcanal, out of Norfolk, Virginia to the North Atlantic for exercises. While on the USS Dwight Eisenhower, he was deployed to the Mediterranean Sea and the Caribbean. During this time his unit supported the Multi-National Peacekeeping Force after the Marine barracks bombing in Beirut, Lebanon. In 1986 his unit embarked on the USS John F. Kennedy in support of operations in the Gulf of Sidra near Libya. In 1987 he transferred to the Naval Aviation Depot in Jacksonville, Florida, where he assumed the duties of Fleet Training Coordinator and Drug and Alcohol Program Advisor.

In January 1990 he left active duty and enlisted in the US Navy Reserves. In May, 1990 he moved back to Ohio and was transferred to the Navy & Marine Corp Reserve Unit at Fort Wayne, Indiana, until 1996

Chief Gasser rejoined the Navy Reserve in January 2000. In the wake of the bombing of the USS Cole he was recalled to active duty and his unit was sent to conduct Anti Terrorism Force Protection operations in the Mideast.

In January 2003, he was again recalled to active duty in support of Iraqi Freedom. In 2004, he

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was again recalled and qualified as Boat Watch Officer. During this time he was privileged to drive one of the Patrol Boats, whose job it was to protect the ships in and out of port and the off shore oil rigs. He told students it was fun to drive one of those speed boats, even though it was dangerous. He has been awarded many medals, including the Navy and Marine Commendation Medal and even the Army Commendation pin, for some of his duties which involved the US Army. He also has a special medal for driving a boat.

While describing the size of an aircraft carrier to the students, he said you could fit all the residents of Fort Jennings, Ottoville, Kalida and half of Delphos on a carrier. Randy mentioned that during one ten-year period, he was away from home 7 1/2 years. He was happy to say he has been in 41 countries of the World.

Randy retired in February 2012. He is currently the Ombudsman Director of the Ohio Committee of the Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve (ESGR) This is an agency of the Department of Defense. In this position they recognize employers for keeping employees who are in the Reserves and have to go away for two weeks of training each year. They also go to bat for reserve service men and women, who have trouble keeping their jobs or returning to their jobs after reserve duty. They have a 90 percent success rate.

Randy is employed by UNOH as the Military Relations Coordinator where he conducts extensive outreach and counseling to veterans, their spouse and dependents in order to educate them on benefits they may be eligible for.

Randy also mentioned the fact that when they were on-shore, they slept in tents. When going to bed they hung their boots upside down to keep scorpions from crawling in them. He said "These scorpions were huge and he didn't care to share his boots with any of them."

I also had the pleasure of talking to Father John Stites, the pastor of the Immaculate Conception Catholic Church in Ottoville. Father John is also a veteran of the US Army. Following high school he attended Defiance College for a year, then took off to work for a time with Dinner Bell Foods. It was during this period when he was drafted in July 1964. He took his basics at Fort Knox, then was sent to Fort Lewis, Washington, where he was in the maintenance department. Then President Johnson called for that 150,000 troops and he was sent to Viet Nam. He served at AN KHE where they supplied support to the First Calvary. Their base was in the jungle in the Viet Nam Highlands where they slept in tents in the jungle. From their camp on the mountain top they had a good view of the area, which was beautiful when they arrived. It was an agricultural area, which they had to turn into an Army Camp. He said: "It was a total disruption of the lives of those farmers and their families."

Father John said he has the utmost respect for those who served in the infantry and such in the jungles. Father John said he, like many others was exposed to Agent Orange and is entitled to Military Disability. He said our government doesn't like to admit to all the Agent Orange effects. He served in Viet Nam for a year and was discharged 29 July 1966. After coming home he had to sort things out in his life. He had always wanted to be a teacher so he enrolled again in Defiance College. During his college years he worked as a Police Dispatcher.

As time went by, following college graduation, he taught at Toledo Central Catholic, where he

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coached football and was head wrestling coach. It was during this time, when one of the priests in Toledo put the bug in him to enter the Priesthood. The thought had crossed his mind, since he wasn't married; so the rest is history. He entered the Seminary at Mount Saint Mary's in Cincinnati in 1972 and was ordained in 1976.

One of his assignments was at LCC in Lima, serving as Principal. He said he was the last priest to serve under Father Herr.

Father John said he likes his pastoral assignment at Ottoville and the people of the area. He is also a member of the VFW. Father John said he often has visitors, who are very impressed with the parish and the area.

Ralph Hoehn, of Delphos (born in Ottoville) is a member of the "Greatest Generation." He was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for his multiple bombing raids over Europe but didn't receive it until June 2010.

Hoehn volunteered for service in October, 1941. He went to basic training the following February. As an aviation cadet he went through multiple rounds of training in the United States Army Air Force, including pilot training under Delphos resident Bob Bendele. The training was extensive and prepared him to fly B-24 bombers over Nazi-occupied France. In May, 1944, he boarded a train for New England, traveling through Delphos. Along with 10,000 other airmen, he sailed to England on the New Amsterdam. Hoehn was assigned to a bomber group station at Metfield, England, and flew 35 missions over France. Of his 35 missions, the most memorable one took place just after Allied Forces stormed the beaches of Normandy. The sky over France was overcast on the 22nd of July, 1944 so orders to drop were reeled in. Due to miscommunication, some bombed anyhow. They were flying very low and finally pulled up, without dropping our bombs. The plane next to him was shot down, and the men taken prisoner until the end of the war. Hoehn's aircraft was damaged. "My plane got shot up pretty bad and I didn't have any navigation system to get back. We didn't drop our bombs, so I went back across the channel toward home and I started losing oil pressure on three engines. I wanted to drop my bombs but they said too many of our ships were in the channel. It was overcast and we had to go through 10,000 feet of clouds to get to our base. A fighter pilot said 'you stay on my wing and I'll take you down,' so I did that and when I saw the ground, all I had to do was drop the throttle and put her down. That was about the scariest mission I had," Hoehn said.

Hoehn returned to the United States just after the Battle of the Bulge. That was in 1944 and he was sent to California for training to fly B-29's when the war ended. He

Melvin Rode shared a letter his father, Henry "Hank" Rode sent home during World War I.

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Somewhere in France

June 16, 1918

My dear Folks: How are you? I am just fine and hope the same to you. Well, I suppose you were out automobile-riding or having some kind of a good time today. It surely has been a nice day here today. If it would be that nice Sunday in the States, I'd have a little bit of Sunday, too. But where I am now, its work everyday and I haven't had a chance to go to church anymore since Palm Sunday. I guess your are pretty busy by this time. It's just about clover hay making time now and it is corn-plowing, too, at the same time. We're surely having nice weather here, now. For about two months now, it has been nice and sunshiney every day. At first when we got here it rained every day, but that was early in the spring, and then it is raining in the States, too. I hope you got my other letters that I wrote to you. I am just wondering if they passed the censor or not. Some of the boys said their folks wrote and said that about all that was left of their letters was their names and address. Well if my letters got thru at all I am sure you have the first one by this time. The first one I wrote from the Supply Company was about the 16th of April. I haven't had any letters yet, but I am in hopes that I will get one pretty soon. I am in hopes that this war will be over and we can all be back home soon. But still we can never tell how long it will last. Well, don't worry about me. I am alright and I hope that some day, I can come back again and then I won't have to write. I was just telling one of the boys this morning I wish I could be home now. Everyone is just fine this time of the year at home. This is about clover hay-making time now and that would be just sport for me to get in back of the hay-loader and work in the hay again. Well, let's hope that by next year, I'll be at it again. This war can't last forever, that is sure. It's funny, I dream about home almost every night and I hope my dreams will come true before long. I haven't had any letters from home yet. I haven't had any mail at all, since the middle of April. I have a notion to subscribe to a newspaper over here so that I'll have a little something to read. I never got a one of those Heralds after I left Camp Sherman. Well, this is enough for this time. I am hoping this will reach you all in the best of health and spirits as it leaves me, and don't forget to write.

I remain as ever, Henry.

Donald Kaverman and three of his neighborhood friends were all drafted into the Army about the same time Don and two others were sent to Korea, while Louis Kaverman was sent to Germany. Don said it took 16 days to go over and 14 days returning home. He said on the way over, he wondered if he would be coming back. Thankfully he did.

Don was a quartermaster, serving at the Shower Point, where he was in charge of checking the water temperature and providing soldiers with clean clothes after returning from the front and showering. He said he met his next door (home) neighbor over there. Bill Hemker was an electrician in Saigon.

His friend, Larry Luersman had the job of driving the commanding officer around in a Jeep, but they didn't meet while in Korea. Don mentioned how the Koreans ate dried up dead fish. Then he said it was a wonderful feeling to come back to the USA and pass under the Golden Gate

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Bridge and step foot on good American soil once again. The four of them always take part in the honor guard at the funerals of veterans.

Many veterans had many stories to tell.

The Bohnlein Family from Delphos had seven boys in World War II. They were: Robert, George, Frank, Joe, John, Louis and Tom. Tom did not return; he was killed at the Battle of Attu, in the Aleutian Islands.

The four Berelsman Brothers, from Fort Jennings were all in World War II. They were Linus, Norbert, Albert and Hubert.

Hubert was killed in the service to his country.

The Jennings Memorial Association, with the financial help of the Fort Jennings American Legion, the Delphos VFW, the Ottoville VFW and Bob Calvelage or Woodlawn Monuments has just erected a monument to those who gave their all in the service of our country.