

Savannah-Area Military Veterans Talk About What It Means to Have Served

By Corey Dickstein – Savannah Morning News

From World War II veterans in their 90s to veterans of the recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan as young as 19 years old, the greater Savannah area is home to nearly 50,000 U.S. military veterans.

According to the most recent U.S. Census data, 48,331 people in Chatham, Bryan, Effingham, and Liberty counties have spent at least a portion of their lives serving in the armed forces.

As Veterans Day 2014 approaches Tuesday, the Savannah Morning News has interviewed several men and women who have served in the United States' signature combat operations of the last 75 years, dating back to the beginning of World War II.

Kenneth Scott Jr.

Army Air Forces/Air Force

World War II

"I always wanted to be a pilot. Ever since I can remember, I wanted to fly airplanes," said Scott, who served 29 years as a fighter pilot, including flying 62 missions in a P-51 Mustang over western Europe in World World War II.

"Every time I'd see one up in the air, I'd go out and watch it until it would go out of site. When Japan attacked Pearl Harbor ... the next week I went in, and said, 'I want to be a fighter pilot. I want to fly P-51s.'

"The biggest honor of my career was flying P-51s to protect B-17s and B-24s from the Germans."

Amelia Jones

Army Air Forces/Women's Army Corps

World War II

“Going from civilian life into the military, it was exciting,” said Jones, who retired as a sergeant after helping establish post offices on Air Force bases during the war. “I can't quite explain it, but I enjoyed every minute of it.

“It was just a duty I had to perform at the time, and I did enjoy it,” she said. “To be a veteran and to look back now over the years and what I endured as a soldier, you felt like somebody. You were an elite group. It was wonderful.”

Bud Porter

Army Air Forces

World War II

“All they had to do with me was to wave the (American) flag and play the music and I was gone,” said Porter, who served as a ball turret gunner on a B-17, flying 11 missions out of England.

“Today, every once in a while, a group that I talk to applauds me, which is always a surprise. I say, ‘You know, really, you're not applauding me, you're applauding everybody who has served in the military now, in the past, and all those who will join in the future.

“Our military is fantastic. We had the best military in the world in World War II, and today we still have the best military in the world.”

Harrell Roberts

Marine Corps

Korean War

“I did my duty for my country, and I'm glad I did,” said Roberts, who fought in the Battle of the Chosin Reservoir in Korea and was severely wounded when he was shot in the left wrist during a firefight with Chinese forces. “I would have (remained) in the Marine Corps if I'd have been in better shape. I'd have been happy to go back.”

An enlisted infantryman, Roberts served in Georgia Company, 3rd Battalion, 1st Marine Division that lost 149 men between 1950 and 1953.

“I feel very lucky,” he said. “I was lucky to be able to serve my country, and I was lucky to be able to have made the friends that I did when I became a Marine.”

Kent Shockey

Marine Corps

Vietnam War

“I can't imagine my life different,” said Shockey, who served two tours in Vietnam as an infantry officer during his 26-year career. “I've always admired the services. I did not plan to be a lifer when I went in, but things kept going right.”

Shockey taught Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC) for 15 years in Savannah after leaving the Marine Corps.

“There's a large number of veterans in our United States,” he said. “They are very prominent. Unfortunately, there are not many in our Congress, and I think that hurts us.”

O.C. Fowler

Navy

Vietnam War

“I grew up wanting to be a Navy pilot and serve my country,” said Fowler, who served 22 years in the Navy including a tour of duty in Vietnam as a Huey helicopter pilot.

“Veterans started in the Revolutionary War. Ever since then veterans have been a mainstay to protect the country, support America and keep us strong.”

Dale Saunders

Marine Corps

Vietnam War

“To be a veteran and to be in the Marine Corps is just an extreme honor that I feel,” said Saunders, who enlisted at 17, served two combat tours in Vietnam and became a warrant officer during his 21-year military career. “A lot of people try to come into the Marine Corps; a few get rejected. Only the top grade come into the Marine Corps.

“Veterans are the backbone of this country. You look at some of your major positions and they're former veterans. They got their leadership and expertise while they were in the military. They know how to handle people; they know how to lead people. It's just an outstanding way to develop your leadership potential.”

Ed Robb

Navy

Vietnam War

“I took quite a while too, I think, appreciate the commitment that those of us who have served made ... When I was a junior officer on duty it was more of an adventure than an absolute commitment, but I learned later on that it really was a valuable commitment,” said Robb, who served as a Naval officer for 10 years. “You get a lot more responsibility as someone in his early to mid-twenties than you might get elsewhere.”

Robb served aboard tank landing ships that were twice sent toward Vietnam and later served on a Destroyer.

“When I see young men and women in the airports coming back from Iraq and Afghanistan, I think as a veteran, you can really appreciate their service more than if you had not served yourself,” he said.

Chief Master Sgt. Neil Allen

Army/Georgia Air National Guard

Desert Storm

"It's very humbling (to be a veteran)," said Allen, who served on active duty in the Army and was deployed to Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm in 1990 as an air cavalry scout. "I've served with a lot of guys I would consider much more worthy of (being honored). I take great pride in it. I'm happy to be able to serve.

Currently, Allen is the chief enlisted manager at the Georgia Air National Guard's Savannah Combat Readiness Training Center.

"Every freedom we have is based on (veterans') sacrifices," he said. "There are literally millions ahead of me that have made the ultimate sacrifice or that have watched buddies die and that have been away from their families for years... Without those veterans, this country would not be what it is today."

1st Sgt. Wesley Hawk

Army/Georgia Army National Guard

Desert Storm/Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation Enduring Freedom

"It's a big honor," Hawk said of being a veteran. "There's so many that came before me. There's so many who have served and did it well. It's just an honor to serve."

Hawk is the senior noncommissioned officer with the Savannah-based Headquarters and Headquarters Battery, 118th Field Artillery Regiment. He served 10 years on active duty including a deployment to Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm. He's served the last 16 years in the Georgia Army National Guard and has deployed to both Iraq and Afghanistan.

"Veterans are what make this country strong," Hawk said. "It's not an easy life ... but it's important that someone is here to do these jobs."

Emily Knitter

Army

Operation Iraqi Freedom

"Being a veteran in a lot of ways to me, I'm not any different than anyone else," said Knitter, who recently left the Army after serving five years, including a tour in Iraq with the 3rd Infantry Division when she was 18.

"Instead of going to college I chose to join the military. But I'm definitely proud of what I did. It really defined who I am as a person; I feel like it really helped me grow up and mature a lot faster than most people."

Knitter, a photographer who is studying marketing at Savannah State University, said she's amazed what veterans from World War II through the initial invasion of Iraq were able to accomplish.

"Whenever soldiers come home from overseas now, they have a welcoming party of World War II (and) Vietnam veterans that are there every single time without fail, no matter what.

"I had the opportunity to talk to one of them who was in Vietnam. It's been decades since he's been home, so I asked him why it's important for him to be there. He started crying, and he said that he never wants service members now to feel the way they did when they came home. That lends some perspective to me; I think we had it very good compared to veterans of those periods. They're the real heroes."

Sgt. Alexandra Shea

Army

Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation Enduring Freedom

"I don't feel unique in being a veteran," said Shea, who served in Iraq in 2003 as a radiology specialist and deployed more recently to Afghanistan with the 1st Armored Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division as a public affairs noncommissioned officer. "There's so many of us right now (still on active duty), I kind of don't feel like a veteran. I kind of doesn't feel like the people that I honor, like my grandparents or the people at the local VFW."

As she nears 15 years in uniform, Shea said she looks up to those, including most of her family, who served before her.

"They've established our freedoms," she said. "They were the guys that really fought for all of our freedoms."

Staff Sgt. Harry Drum

Army

Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation Enduring Freedom

"I feel pretty honored to be a veteran," said Drum, an infantryman who served two tours in Iraq before a nine-month tour last year in eastern Afghanistan with the Fort Stewart-based 4th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division.

"I don't necessarily feel like a veteran. I see the guys walking around with, say, their World War II hats on, and I just don't know if I'm chopped into that category until I get out of the Army and I'm an old guy wearing my hat.

"But I do feel honored to be in kind of the same category as all those soldiers who have committed their lives for this country."

Drum credited a long tradition of family service with helping inspire him to enlist at 17 and remain in the Army.

"Veterans are the heart and soul of this country," he said. "If it wasn't for the veterans, all the way back to the Revolutionary War, we wouldn't have a Constitution or a Bill of Rights or any of our freedoms."

Savannah Veterans Discuss Their Service