

Honoring Our Veterans Kevin Gatewood

U.S. Navy Veteran Kevin Gatewood is concerned about the diminishing numbers of veterans participation in local service organizations, which he believes can be a positive experience for anyone who have served in the armed forces.

Kevin, a member of and adjutant for Disabled American Veterans Chapter 28, finds solace and encouragement by associating and sharing with fellow veterans.

Born March 20, 1961 in the old Mt. Vernon Jefferson Memorial Hospital to Gerald and Wanda Gatewood, Kevin was the younger of two boys. He recalls playing war with his GI Joe figures and had an avid interest in planes, guns, motorcycles and World War II.

His father, a U.S. Army veteran of World War II, was in the Battle of the Bulge and shared his experiences with Kevin. His stepfather, who was a survivor of a U.S. Navy destroyer sunk during the World War II, also whet Kevin's interest with his recollections. It sounded pretty adventurous to young Kevin.

He graduated from Mt. Vernon Township High School in 1979 and focused on history and vocational drafting. Kevin then attended ITT Tech College in Evansville, Indiana. Afterwards, he returned to Mt. Vernon and attended Rend Lake College studying pre-engineering before working for Roffmann Engineering as a surveyor and draftsman.

After enlisting in the U.S. Navy, USN, in 1981, Kevin completed his eight-week basic training at San Diego as a Nuclear, "NUKE" Electrician. His next stop was Great Lakes Naval Training Center for Electricians Mate School and then on to Orlando for nine months of advanced nuclear training.

Kevin recalled having worked on a prototype of the 1956 Nautilus in a testing facility with an actual reactor. He was then sent to Groton, Connecticut where he signed his first duty station and was then aboard the USS Dallas, SSN 700, which was the submarine about which Tom Clancy's, *The Hunt for Red October*, was written and then made into a movie.

Shortly after reporting aboard the Dallas in December 1983, Kevin and his fellow submariners were deployed to the Indian Ocean for the next seven months. They tracked Russian submarines and dealt mostly with Cold War issues. Later they were given liberty in Albany and Perth Australia for three days each.

Kevin noted when they left Connecticut, the sub and its crew traversed around Africa, circumnavigated the earth and returned via the Panama Canal, thus receiving the Order of Magellan and Order of the Ditch awards respectively. Additionally, when they crossed the equator, they had to flush the toilets to see if the rotation would actually reverse; no determination was ever made.

Because Kevin stands a mighty six feet five inches, trying to sleep in a six-foot-rack was difficult to say the least. Then after having dealt with that situation for his years of service, severe back issues followed, resulting in a medical discharge.

Though he said he enjoyed his time serving his country, Kevin did acknowledge the now-recognized negative aspects of being on a submarine long term. Combine the close quarters with not knowing the difference between day and night and add the 18-hour work day, maintenance

and drills, and the result is a sleep-deprived serviceman. “We all stayed constantly fatigued,” said Kevin. A circadian rhythm references the internal sleep clock which regulates the wake-asleep cycle and repeats roughly every 24 hours. Kevin said the USN is now in the process of switching to 24-hour day’s to alleviate this problem.

After his discharge May 13, 1985, Kevin returned to his hometown and began working for the City of Mt. Vernon as a building inspector for the next three years. He spent some time after as a self-employed contractor then attended Southern Illinois University at Carbondale where he earned a bachelors degree in elementary education and a minor in environmental studies, graduating in 1998.

He then attended law school in Houston but chose a teaching career in high school physics and chemistry at the Richard Melbourne Academy. He said the economy worsened in Houston and he decided to return home in 2010. Two years later, he was back at his previous position as the City’s Building Inspector, where he remains today.

Kevin’s main purpose of granting this interview was to draw attention to the values of military service organizations, in which participation has been on the decline. He is a member of the local Disabled American Veterans, DAV, Chapter 28 and is a mighty advocate for the services and camaraderie offered by being a member, regardless of military affiliation or dates served.

A study conducted by Russell, C.A. & Russell, D.W. in 2018 revealed the social identity theory suggests that the degree to which people identify with an organizational group can have multiple beneficial outcomes. This research focuses on how membership with a veteran service organization relates social isolation is further reduce when members both attend and feel strong social identification with the other members to veterans social isolation and perceptions that military service was beneficial to society, ultimately leading to improved veterans benefits.

Not only is attendance in these organizations linked to reduced social isolation, but their feelings of isolation are further reduced when members feel strongly about social identification with other members.

Because little boys are taught from the get-go they are to be strong and stoic and never show emotions, it could be speculated some veterans keep their memories and feelings bottled up, left to fester. Kevin hopes more veterans will avail themselves of the benefits offered by service organizations.

“The DAV also provides transportation for veterans to doctor appointments and assists with disability claims,” said Kevin. “ And, that is whether or not it is a first-time disability claim or an appeal to increase it. We meet at 6 p.m. the second Tuesday of each month at the Rolland W. Lewis Building in Veterans Park; a free dinner is provided.”

The Mission Statement of DAV is as follows:

“We are dedicated to a single purpose; empowering veterans to lead high-quality lives with respect and dignity. We accomplish this by ensuring that veterans and their families can access the full range of benefits available to them; fighting for the interest of America’s injured heroes on Capitol Hill; and educating the public about the great sacrifices and needs a veteran transitioning back to civilian life.”

Additional information is available by contacting mtvernondav@gmail.com