

# The Marshall Democrat-News

## Marshall veteran returns from Honor Flight

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By Sarah Reed/General Manager



Bill Vardiman served in the U.S. Army from 1965-1969.

Sarah Reed/Democrat-News

He retired 10 years ago from ConAgra Frozen Foods. But after a decade in retirement, Bill Vardiman, of Marshall, still looks back on memories from his time away from home — a time when he served four years in Europe during the Vietnam War. Sitting back in a chair at The Marshall Democrat-News office, some of those memories made him laugh, others were more pensive. Regardless of their affect on Vardiman, the memories surfaced because he had just returned from a Central Missouri Honor Flight trip to Washington, D.C.

“I would encourage any veteran — men or women, active duty, Reserves, National Guard — if they have served during a period of one of these conflicts to make an application to go,” Vardiman said of the Honor Flight program.

Veterans and volunteers on the 50th flight in the Central Missouri Program departed Columbia at 1:45 a.m. Tuesday, Nov. 7, on a bus headed for the St. Louis airport. The program’s mission is to transport veterans to the nation’s capital to visit the memorials dedicated to their service. On the 50th flight, there were veterans from the World War II, Korean War, Vietnam War, Cold War and Iraqi Freedom eras, Vardiman said.

“I spent four years in the United States Army, in Europe, specifically (three years) in Germany,” Vardiman explained. “I was a radio intercept operator with the United States Army Security

Agency, which is a part of NSA. I had much better duty than a lot of our men and women that were on the front in Vietnam.”

The Saline County native served from 1965-1969. While completing his Advanced Individual Training in Massachusetts, he said he had the privilege of serving under Col. Lewis Millett. Millett was Vardiman’s battalion commander who was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor.

“He had the distinction of leading the last fixed bayonet charge in the Korean War,” Vardiman said. “He was rather a salty character. You usually saw him either in a Stetson hat and tennis shoes, or he was in dress uniform. But usually he would have a pistol belt with one of the old M1 bayonets attached to it. With his white hair and his white handlebar mustache, he was quite a distinctive fellow.”

All of Vardiman’s work focused on security, in which he primarily intercepted transmissions. He served at a small base in Herzogenaurach, Germany, where he was specifically assigned to Russian military traffic.

“Sometimes it was slow and very boring, and sometimes it would kind of make the hairs stand up on the back of your neck,” he recalled. “I was there during the Six-Day War ... and also during the invasion of Czechoslovakia.”

Participating in an Honor Flight was something Vardiman said has been on his bucket list. With some encouragement from his wife, Billie, and from others including Marty Smith, Jim Chevalier, and Mary and Gene Castle, Vardiman decided to fill out an application.

The nearly 23-hour trip gave something to the veterans that Vardiman may not have realized they needed: healing.

“Everybody was pretty quiet on the bus trip back, trying to absorb the day,” he recalled. “I was feeling like I’ve really been recognized for my service and I feel like I’ve been welcomed home.”

While in Washington, veterans visited Arlington National Cemetery and witnessed a Changing of the Guard Ceremony at the Tomb of the Unknowns, visited the World War II Memorial, the Women in Military Service Memorial, and viewed multiple other memorials and monuments throughout the tour. Veterans on each Honor Flight also have the opportunity to visit the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, although rain hindered much of their time on the Nov. 7 trip.

“We held onto our ponchos and walked past the Lincoln Memorial down to the Vietnam Memorial,” Vardiman stated. “There were several veterans having their pictures taken in front of the statues ... and I turned around and everyone had gone with it raining. I said ‘I really want a picture of that and I’m going to try anyway.’ My picture really turned out great. I’m proud of it. While we were at the Wall, and it (was) pouring down rain, I had five names that I wanted to do etchings of. And I pulled my list out and started hunting. I found my first name and by then my list was just sopping wet.”

But the visit was not wasted. The bus driver and organizers took the veterans to the National Air and Space Museum. Vardiman said it was the first flight to get to do that.

“We had a fantastic time there,” he said, listing off a number of the exhibits he was able to photograph. “I got a picture of one of the space shuttle engines. I thought ‘my gosh, the size of that thing, what could it push?’ I got to reading the placard and it was only one of five engines. I’ve (also) always been interested in Charles Lindbergh’s flight to Paris, and the Wright Brothers and getting to see their toolbox from when they built airplanes ...”

Though the etchings in stones and grandeur of the memorials were reason enough for the trip itself, perhaps more significant for the veterans were the receptions they had of applauding crowds at the airports, and students and tourists shaking their hands. Vardiman was able to meet with his nephew at an airport stop, and he took a moment to let the reception from passengers and airport employees sink in.

“There were handshakes and knuckle bumps and high fives and thank yous ... greetings from people waving flags,” he said.

Even returning to Columbia from St. Louis on a bus was a touching experience for Vardiman, in which their bus followed an escort of law enforcement vehicles and approximately 300 motorcyclists. The entourage led them from Kingdom City to Columbia.

“I can’t express my thanks enough for all the people that volunteer for Central Missouri Honor Flight and the program they produce and promote for veterans,” he said. “I felt like the odd man out because I hadn’t served in Vietnam. ... (Our Honor Flight group) had 14 veterans in wheelchairs. We had a guardian for every two veterans. I have the greatest respect for these guys.”

For more information about the program, visit [www.centralmissourihonorflight.com](http://www.centralmissourihonorflight.com) or call 573-256-1930.