

Vietnam pilot honored as Veteran of the Month

By Sherri Onorati, Special to The Leader

August has been a hot month for Tipton County but dealing with the heat is nothing new for this month's Veteran of the Month.

Lieutenant Colonel William Thomas "Tommy" Cheairs III, a Memphis native, served during the Vietnam War as a C-130 pilot.

Nominated by his sister-in-law Alice Fisher, Cheairs was honored as the August Veteran of the Month earlier this month at a ceremony held at the Tipton County Museum, Veteran Memorial and Nature Center surrounded by family, friends, community leaders and fellow veterans.

"I'm so please to have nominated what I refer to as a true American hero," said Fisher. "Tommy doesn't talk about what he went through, but it was a spectacular service and this honor is well deserved."

Born less than a year after the end of World War II, Cheairs knew when he went to college that he wanted to serve his country and chose to attend the University of Mississippi under the Air Force ROTC program, earning a commission as a second lieutenant upon graduation. Acting on his desire to fly, Cheairs soon moved to Lubbock, Texas where he learned to pilot the C-130 Hercules, an aircraft capable of airdropping loads of up to 42,000 pounds. Used for a variety of peace and wartime missions, the C-130 was instrumental in troop movement and refugee evacuations during the Vietnam War.

Cheairs spent a total of five years on active duty as an Air Force pilot, with two of those years flying combat missions in Vietnam. Mastering his craft, Cheairs' expertise and skill as a combat pilot during that tumultuous time, soon saw him awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC), America's oldest military aviation award given for extraordinary service and heroism. Cheairs was awarded the DFC for his successful missions in resupplying An Lộc, a city whose residents were left to starve after being cut off by the Viet Cong.

The Battle of An Lộc was a major and long-drawn out battle which ended in victory for the South Vietnamese, and halted the Viet Cong's advancement towards Saigon. The bloody battle saw Cheairs and his fellow pilots flying against heavily armed enemy units, which ultimately saw the loss of three C-130s and their crew members and ground fire damage to countless others. A captain at the time, Cheairs' DFC was awarded for an extraordinary mission completed on April 27, 1972.

"Flying a night low-level tactical emergency airdrop of critically needed supplies to a besieged concentration of allied forces located in a heavily defended hostile area. With complete disregard for his own personal safety and using previously untried tactics developed for this specific operation, Captain Cheairs flew the night resupply mission and successfully delivered his cargo on schedule within the established limits of the drop zone in spite of intense hostile ground fire and marginal visibility," reads his citation.

After returning home, Cheairs served for 18 years in the Tennessee Air National Guard, retiring in December 1989 as a Lieutenant Colonel after 23 years of service to his country. A second career as a pilot for FedEx enabled him to continue flying for another 20 years.

Cheairs has been married to the former Susan Fisher since 1969 and they are the proud parents of a son and daughter. The Cheairs are members of the First United Methodist Church in Covington.

The Tipton County Veteran's Council presented Cheairs with several awards for his years of service, including a certificate of honor, a years membership in the Tipton County Veterans Council, a certificate for a canvas portrait given by Munford Funeral Home, a two hour house cleaning by Merry Maids and a flag flown over the state capitol, signed by the governor and given by District 81 State Representative Deborah Moody.

Kathy Desjarlais, president of the Tipton County Veterans Council presented Cheairs with a Vietnam veteran lapel pin, explaining its significance.

"You weren't welcomed home the way the majority of our other veterans were, so as a part of the 50th anniversary of the commemoration of the Vietnam War, I present you with this Vietnam veteran lapel pin."

Desjarlais then read Cheairs' Veteran of the Month recognition citation.

"It is with heartfelt appreciation of your tireless efforts in support of our United States, the Tipton County Museum, Veterans Memorial and Nature Center in partnership with the Tipton County Veteran Council gratefully acknowledges your service as our veteran of the month," read Desjarlais. "Your dedication to our country is commendable and an honorable addition to the fight for freedom in the world."

Cheairs was very moved when accepting his awards and recognition.

"I want to thank Alice and the Veterans Council and everyone for coming and recognizing me with this honor," said Cheairs. "The real heroes in my book are the World War II veterans like my father who was a bomber pilot who was shot down and held at a prisoner of war camp for two years, so I thank you for the honor."

The Veteran of the Month program is sponsored by the Tipton County Museum, Veteran Memorial and Nature Center and the Tipton County Veterans Council. Sponsors of the monthly event include Tipton County Veterans Council, Patriot Bank, The Bank of Tipton and Munford Funeral Home. Underwriters include the VFW Post 4840 and the Disable American Veterans Auxiliary in Millington. Honorees are recognized on the second Tuesday of the month at 6:30 p.m. and the public is invited to both make nominations and to attend the ceremony.