

Thirty year Navy veteran honored

By Sherri Onorati, Special to The Leader

There was no such thing as an “all volunteer force” when September’s Veteran of the Month, Ernest Tigue, joined the United States Navy in 1955. At that time, the sea service relied heavily on young hopefuls wanting to join the Navy before they were “drafted” into the Army and Master Chief Aviation Ordnanceman Ernest Tigue was no different.

A myriad of duty stations and a lifetime of experiences brought friends, church family, local officials and fellow veterans to the Tipton County Museum, Veteran Memorial and Nature Center to honor Tigue for his 30 years of service to the country.

Covington Alderwoman Minnie Bommer, who spoke of his kindness and dedication, nominated Tigue for the recognition and honor.

“The first time I saw Mr. Tigue I thought he was special and after talking with him and learning about his many accomplishments, I knew he was special,” Bommer told the crowd. “We are fortunate here in Tennessee that his last duty station was here in Millington and that his family chose to stay here. It is because of Master Chief Tigue and many others like him, that all of us here in these United States enjoy the freedom that many do not, and it is because of him and people like him that we should always give our gratitude and appreciation.”

Born in Shreveport, La., Tigue spent a brief time on the west coast before enlisting in the Navy in 1955. He completed his basic training at Great Lakes, Ill., and then attended aviation ordnance (AO) school. Tigue saw duty onboard U.S. Naval carriers USS Randolph (CVA-15), USS Forrestal (CV-59), USS John F. Kennedy (CV-67) and the Navy’s first super carrier built after World War II, the USS Constellation (CV-64). He completed tours of duty at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, NAS Patuxent River in Maryland and two tours at NAS Memphis, Tenn., and he served as a crew member of fighter squadrons VF-191 and VF-121 before retiring on October 1, 1984 after 30 years of service in the Navy.

In the retelling of a few of the experiences that Tigue had while in the Navy, he spoke movingly to those gathered at his recognition ceremony of several life-affirming incidences that occurred throughout his career which lead to his acceptance of Christianity and Jesus Christ.

“I have experienced a lot of accomplishments during my tour in the Navy, but it was not something that I did,” began Tigue, stopping for a moment to compose himself. “I just thank the grace of God for getting me through it and I thank him and I give him all the glory and honor.”

Tigue recounted being a member of the commissioning crew of the USS Constellation and the devastating fire it had during its construction that killed 50 civilian workers and of the explosion of one of the ship’s boilers while at sea and having to fight the resulting

fire. He spoke of his time in Cuba at the start of Fidel Castro's military coup and narrowly missing being on the bus of service members and civilians that were kidnapped by Castro's regime, being caught in the crossfire of a mortar exchange between rebels and the sitting government, and missing a flight that later crashed in the Philippines that killed 29 on board.

"Castro was in the process of taking over and the rebels made people give us things for free, so we pulled as much liberty as we could," he remembered, smiling. "I always took the last bus back but this one night they had four busses and I didn't realize it so I wasn't in it and that fourth bus was captured by Castro. It had 19 sailors and marines and 10 civilians on it. Castro [eventually] let the military members go but he killed all of the civilians. One was a GS worker that worked with us and he was supposed to trade his brother Raul for him. So, when they dropped him off for the exchange, they did so with about 40 bullet holes in him," he said shaking his head at the memory, "and I also ended up in between a mortar fight, trying to get across the street. It was an experience there. You go through these things and you look back and you say it was the grace of God who got you through all these things."

One of the many awards that Tigie earned during his years in the service was a Navy Commendation medal, awarded by U.S. Seventh Fleet Vice Admiral M. F. Weisner for the Secretary of the Navy during the Vietnam War, which read, "For meritorious service while attached to and serving in USS CONSTELLATION (CVA-64) as leading chief petty officer of the air launched missile division from 1 Sep 1969 to 30 April 1970 during combat operations. Chief Petty Officer Tigie's expert knowledge and willingness to work long hours played a vital role in maintaining the maximum readiness and reliability of air launched missiles... his responsiveness to ordnance handling and efficient missile build up and delivery requirements increased the overall combat readiness of the ship."

The Tipton County Veteran's Council presented the Atoka resident with several awards for his many 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 and a flag flown over the state capitol, signed by the governor and given by District 81 State Representative Deborah Moody, who also attended the moving ceremony.

"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," said Kathy Desjarlais, chairman of the Tipton County Veteran Council, reading from the certificate of honor presented to Tigie. "Your dedication to our country is commendable and an honorable addition to the fight for freedom in the world."

"I had a good time in the Navy and really enjoyed it," said Tigie. "I look back now at the things that I went through and I say, when you're young and dumb and not a Christian," he said shaking his head, "when you look back and see that God spared you... I should have been on this aircraft that crashed and I should have been fallen overboard and I ask

what is God keeping me around for? The grace of God was with me and he guided me through all that time and I have to give him the grace and the honor and the praise and why he's kept me around this long I don't know. But I liked to thank you guys for coming out and for being here I really do appreciate it. I didn't expect this crowd and all these higher ups," added the octogenarian smiling. "Everybody who retires has an "I love me" wall and I just got some more goodies to put up on my wall," he finished laughing.

Covington Mayor Justin Hanson also attended and thanked Tigue for his many years of service.

"Mr. Tigue, I just want to thank you for your service and to echo what Alderman Bommer said, you're my hero... you're our hero. You are more than deserving of the honor that you are getting tonight."

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.