

Two tours in Vietnam gives Billings much to be thankful for

By Sherri Onorati, Special to The Leader

More than 2.6 million personnel served within the borders of South Vietnam, including Atoka resident, Henry Leslie Billings, who served two tours in as an Army officer.

Nominated by fellow Vietnam veteran and friend H. T. Ray, Billings, known to his family and friends as Leslie, was born and raised in Atoka, the sixth child and youngest son of Joseph Andrew and Lucille Leslie Billings. His siblings included older brothers Harold, Earl, Bill and Mike and his sister Marilyn. He laughed when remarking that he and his brother Mike were considered after thoughts because his oldest brothers were 17 and 14 years older than he.

Although he was the baby, he soon learned life was cruel after the loss of his beloved mother when he was just five years old. His father's sister, Winnie Billings, came to live with the family to help raise him and his brother, Mike. Older brother Earl Billings remembers that time well.

"My aunt came and helped raise him and did most of the raising and did a fine job," said Earl, proudly. "I'm so proud of him and honored to be his brother."

After graduating from Munford High School, and spending a semester in college, his number came up and he was drafted into the Army in December 1966, but Billings was ready – he came from a long line of military men and family members who serve their fellow citizens – his father and uncle both served in the Navy during World War I, and all of his older brothers also served their country and his sister Marilyn is a registered nurse.

Billings was sent to Ft. Campbell, Ky., to attend boot camp and then advance infantry training at Ft. Ord in California. Even though he didn't have a college degree, he scored so well on military tests that he was sent to Officer Candidate School at Ft. Benning, Ga., and was commissioned a Second Lieutenant. Additional training included heavy mortar, Davy Crockett School and Jungle Survival School in Panama.

When he received his orders to Vietnam, his father didn't take the news well that his youngest child was being sent to fight on the front lines of a terrible war. Billings revealed a secret his Aunt Winnie told him when he returned.

"When I left for my first tour, my daddy, and I didn't know this until I came back, but my daddy's sister, told me, 'your daddy, the day after you left, went down to the cemetery to pick a place to bury you,'" he said. "She said he came home and told her, that boy won't ever be back,' so I shocked him and came back twice!" he added laughing.

Billings landed in Vietnam on December 4, 1968 and served his first tour of duty in the jungles as a weapons platoon leader with the 199th Light Infantry Brigade, C Co., 2nd Battalion., 3rd Infantry Division. In country for a year, he was injured by a ground mine while on patrol along the Cambodian border. He returned stateside to Fort Campbell in

December 1969, where he was assigned as a basic training company commander, training new recruits for nine months.

“When I came back from my first tour, my reward for doing a great job in Vietnam was to put me in charge of a basic training company for nine and a half months working 16-18 hour days,” he laughed. “Then, because I did such a great job at that, they rewarded me again and sent me back to Vietnam and I had just gotten married too!”

He was assigned to return to Vietnam, but was able to be sent to a 12 week Vietnamese language course before returning to Vietnam. He kicked off the New Year landing for second tour in Vietnam on January 1, 1971, this time as a senior advisor to the 2nd Battalion, 10th Regiment, 7th ARVN Division, where he was assigned to work with and train the battalion’s Vietnamese commander, for the next 10 months.

“We covered the rear area of Ben Tre City, but we’d stay out for a month and only made it back to the city maybe three to five days a month,” recalled Billings. “We camped out in the Kein Hoa Providence. I was the senior advisor and trained them in English to call in American assets.”

Shadowing and living with the South Vietnamese unit, he soon discovered living conditions he was not accustomed to but his assignment required he learned to adapt. Soon he was eating what the locals ate – boiled duck, fermented fish, edible weeds and coconut milk. Although, he learned to eat like a local, he never got used to the way they treated their children.

“Nobody in the world values kids like we do,” he said, the pain of the memories still obviously raw. “There were five or six kids swimming in a canal that [Viet Cong] had sent out to distract us. The North had set up a claymore mine and detonated it, killing three of those kids and injuring several of our men. They didn’t care about those kids... they just used them. The way I got to feeling was the men and women deserved what they got but the children didn’t. They didn’t have a dog in the race and it really hurt.”

On a lighter note, Billings said his Vietnamese language lessons he had learn weren’t used like they were supposed to because his Vietnamese counterparts didn’t want to speak Vietnamese with him – they wanted to learn English.

“I went through the Me Tarzan, you Jane course, which was 12 weeks to just learn the basics,” he said. “We were more concerned about reading and speaking so we could get along but they didn’t want me to speak English to them, they wanted to learn English. So I was giving English classes when we wasn’t moving... of course it was southern English!” he added laughing. “My Vietnamese instructor at Ft. Hood told me I’d never learn to speak Vietnamese because of my southern accent. I told her isn’t that what I was suppose to speak... Southern Vietnamese?”

His second tour ended in Vietnam after 11 months, sending him back the U.S. and his next training assignment at Ft. Benning, then he was off to Ft. Gordon, Ga., and the

Military Police Brigade. After serving seven years on active duty, Billings fell victim to reduction in force cuts and was transferred to the Army reserves with the rank of Captain.

After his service, Billings enjoyed a 29-year career with DuPont and continues to serve his country and fellow service members through his membership and support of several veterans organizations, including the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Disabled American Veterans, Vietnam Veterans of America, and Military Order of the Purple Heart. Billings is an integral part of the volunteer force at the Tipton County Museum, Veterans Memorial and Nature Center and shares his talents as a soloist at the annual Tipton County Veterans Council Memorial Day service. Ever so the leader, he continues to look after his veterans and selflessly spends many hours on the road transporting veterans to and from doctor appointments and helping them to fill out compensation claims so that they may get the care they have earned.

The Tipton County Veteran's Council presented Billings 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 resolution signed by the governor and a flag flown over the state capitol, given by District 81 State Representative Deborah Moody.

Kathy Desjarlais, president of the Tipton County Veterans Council presented Billings with a Vietnam commemorative veteran lapel pin, and than read his 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."

Billings has been happily married to the love of his life, Melody, a former cheerleader he met at a football game, for more than 46 years. They are the proud parents of a daughter, Wendi, son-in-law Roger Allen and Kade, their beloved grandson. Billings and his wife are members of Bethel Cumberland Presbyterian Church in Atoka.

Paul Mason, Commandant of the Tipton County Marine Corps League, Det 1429, thanked Billings for his friendship, story telling and service.

"I really value your friendship and swapping war stories with you," said Mason. "You are well deserved of this honor. Thank you for your service."

Covington Mayor Justin Hanson expressed his appreciation on behalf of the city.

"Leslie, congratulations and thank you for your service. We are so proud of you and thank you for your service to this community and your family's service."

Billings said he felt very honored for the evening's recognition.

"I am very honored and real proud and I want to thank H.T. for nominating me," he said. "I was proud to serve and I didn't mind it a bit. I served with some of the greatest people in the world. I have been pushing to get all of our World War II veterans recognized that we can because they are leaving us fast. God bless them because if it hadn't been for them we wouldn't be here. I appreciate them and everything they did. I appreciate the board for selecting me and I am honor and proud to be chosen and I accept with a thank you on my behalf and on behalf of my band of brothers – Spec 4 Arthur Bell, Sgt 1st Class Vencen Ackerson, 1stLt Thomas Trammel Staples, Capt. William "Bill" Denny and 1stLt William "Bill" Lewis – men who served with me and who were all killed in Vietnam. As long as I am alive, they will never be forgotten and I accept this honor on their behalf as well."

Fellow Vietnam veteran, H.T. Ray moved those present when he spoke from the heart of the sacrifices every veteran gives.

"It was a great shock to me when I researched how those who spent time in that crazy Asian war are passing away just as fast as the WWII veterans are," he said. "My heart goes out to every Vietnam veteran, every Vietnam era veteran and everyone of us that served in a rice paddy or in a mud field ... thank you everyone for everything that you did. We appreciate everything our veterans do everyday. All veterans have a place in our hearts."

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.