

May Veteran of the Month

By Sherri Onorati, Special to The Leader

If you were a young man during the 1960s and living in Mason, even the most attentive parents and the best upbringing couldn't keep you out of trouble. One of those young men soon realized after graduating from Gailor High School, that he was heading down a dark path and made a desperate life-changing decision to help him find his way.

May's Veteran of the Month honored by the Tipton County Veterans Council on May 12, was retired Master Sergeant John R. McBride, USAF, who told the crowd gathered in his honor about the choices he made and the impact those choices have made on his life.

Born and raised in Mason, McBride realized he enjoyed the night life more than the college life while attending Austin Peay College. So, he quit school and joined the United States Air Force in 1966.

McBride started his career as a firefighter and spent his first four years in the field, enjoying the challenges, but soon learned there was a shortage of helicopter pilots. Dreaming of becoming a pilot, he planned to leave the Air Force and join the U.S. Army as a helo pilot, but a conversation with an older veteran changed his mind.

"I always wanted to fly and I wanted leave the Air Force and go into the Army to be a pilot," remembered McBride. "I don't know who he was, but he came up to me and said, 'Young man, I heard you talking and you don't want to do that – the life expectancy of a chopper pilot in Vietnam is about one day... stay where you are.' But, I really wanted to fly, so I retrained as a loadmaster."

After retraining as a loadmaster, McBride worked on C-123 and C-130 aircraft. Vietnam was still being fought and he soon found himself in country, resupplying and hauling troops into forward areas, carrying killed in actions (KIAs) and evacuating hundreds of Vietnamese refugees, many of them children. At the end of his two years in Vietnam, he had racked up over 393 combat flight hours. McBride, recounted one such operation for those in attendance.

"We were evacuating refugees 'cause if we didn't get them out, they wouldn't survive the night. We started taking on fire and had injuries onboard," he said. "I saw children separated from their parents and parents without their children, but we had to stop loading or we wouldn't have been able to lift off and that disturbed me. It will always be a part of my life, regardless of what nationality, regardless of what race we are all human beings and I took that thing serious – they don't know me and I didn't know them, but I did know they were human beings and they deserved to live just as much as I did, but I couldn't get them all on that airplane and that was troubling."

Master Sgt. McBride served for 21 years, earning numerous awards and citations, including the distinguished Flying Cross with two bronze oak leaf clusters, the Vietnam Service Medal with two bronze service stars, the Republic of Vietnam Gallantry Cross with palm device, and Air Force Outstanding Unit Award with four bronze leaf clusters. He retired from active service in March 1987.

Even though he's retired from the Air Force, McBride is still serving his community, this time as a pastor. He has been the pastor for Pilgrim Rest Baptist Church in Three Points, Henning for more than 22 years, with his wife Louise, whom he married in 1987, by his side. His call to serve others also leads him to serve as a volunteer chaplain at Baptist Memorial Hospital for the past 20 years.

"I was a gambler – dice, cards, you name it," explained McBride about his time in the service. "I was in Germany when I was thinking about chopper field, and God sent me to the sin capital of the world... to Las Vegas. I said, 'I'm going to get rich now with what I know, I'm going to get rich.' But when I left there, I had lost everything. I look back and realize He was preparing me because I don't gamble today. They're businesses and you're not going to beat them...but I know he was preparing me for greater service to mankind.

"That's one of the things that stands out while serving in the military – learning to take instruction. The military, through training, takes control of you and that's a hard thing because you're not willing to give it up. But if they can't get control of you then you can't do what they want you to do, when they want you to do it. And that's the hardest thing to give up – something you have been so comfortable of having and holding on to. To walk and do what they tell you to do and you know what? It's the same way with Christ. We have to give up our way of doing things to walk with him and that was hard for me."

McBride is also a member of the Tipton County Rotary Club and the American Legion Post 67 in Munford. In addition to his wife, his family includes a daughter, Crystal and two sons, Jami and Tony.

Kathy Desjarlais, the 2015 Chairman of the Tipton County Veteran Council, read McBride's certificate of honor, "It is with heart felt appreciation for your tireless efforts in support of our United States military, the Tipton County Museum, Veteran Memorial and Nature Center in partnership with the Tipton County Veterans Council gratefully acknowledge the selfless service of our veteran of the month for May 2015.... Your dedication to our country is commendable and an honorable addition for the fight for freedom throughout the world."

"I served my country with dignity, I gave it the best that I had and now God has placed me into another service to where I'm still serving people but he had to break me of some bad habits first – I was on the verge of becoming an alcoholic, he took that away from me, I was a smoker, he took that away me – he took away all of the bad habits, cleaned me up and gave me a good wife," he added laughing softly. "Back then, you did the best

you could and hoped you made it back home. By God's grace, I am standing before you today to say to the thank you to the Veterans Council. Thank you for honoring someone like me who is nothing, but in the eyes of God we are all someone special."

The Veteran of the Month program is sponsored by the Tipton County Museum, Veteran Memorial and Nature Center and the Tipton County Veterans Council. The next honoree will be named on Tuesday, June 9 at 6:30 p.m. The public is invited to both make nominations and attend the ceremony.