



Photos by Katherine Lacaze

Ron Robbins, of Ocean Park, Wash., is a proud veteran who spent 24 years in the U.S. Air Force and retired as a senior master sergeant and first sergeant in his division. Now he spends his time volunteering in many community organizations.

RON ROBBINS, OCEAN PARK, WASH.

By the time Ron Robbins received his draft notice in 1967, he was already in basic training for the U.S. Air Force. He joined directly out of high school and spent the next 24 years in the service, including two tours in Vietnam.

Going into the Air Force, he did not have many expectations of what the experience would be like.

“I did notice a lot of people were having difficulty with the discipline,” he said. “I came from a very, very disciplined family, so it didn’t faze me. It was like being at home. I took to the military life immediately. I was comfortable with it. I enjoyed it. Every base I went to was like coming home to family, because I knew what the rules were, I knew how things were supposed to work, and they worked that way.”

After his initial 10 years in the military, Robbins spent eight as a police officer. Injured on the job, he decided it was time to return to the Air Force. He served another 14 years before retiring as a senior master sergeant.

Discussing the significance of being a veteran, Robbins referenced a heavy piece of twisted metal he has held onto for years, explaining, “That’s a piece of Viet Cong sharp metal.” It landed near him during a rocket attack in Vietnam. When he picked up the metal fragment, it was so hot it cut and seared his hand at the same time.

“When things blow up around military people, that’s what goes into their bodies,” he said. “And a lot of people don’t realize that soldiers that are out there have this stuff flying at them, and they go out there anyway and do their job ...

“That’s because they’re dedicated to what they want to do. They have pride in serving their country. I don’t think a lot of people fully grasp what it means to the individuals that are in the military and what some of them sacrifice.”

“Until you experience that kind of thing,” Robbins said, it’s hard to explain what it feels like to be in the midst of a combat situation. “It’s not a fear. Probably a lot like going through a tornado. You know it’s happening, you do your best to protect yourself, then when it’s all over, you get kind of rattled about it, ‘Wow, did you see that?’ While you’re going through it, you do what you have to in order to make things work.”



Ron Bline has lived in Seaside for 20 years and is a member of the Seaside American Legion Post 99. He was stationed stateside during the Vietnam War, but had many interactions with military personnel returned from overseas.

RON BLINE, SEASIDE

When Seaside resident Ron Bline was drafted into the U.S. Army in July 1966 as a 20-year-old, he was ambivalent. Reflecting back, he said, “It was very good to be thrown into an environment where you had no choice, and you just make the best of it. Overall, I enjoyed it.”

Despite the ongoing Vietnam War, he was stationed stateside — at Fort MacArthur in San Pedro, Calif. — during the entirety of his two-year service as a pay clerk, though he knew he could be called overseas any time. In his position, Bline consistently dealt with soldiers returning from Vietnam who had received incorrect compensation and were looking for help.

“It felt really good that I could help get their pay straightened out,” he said.

Typically, the recruiting officer called enlisted members to a meeting to discuss extending their service when they had only six months remaining, but “he didn’t call me in,” Bline joked. The officer knew he was not intending to stay in the army. Upon getting out in 1968, Bline went back to college to obtain a degree in psychology.

Even still, he enjoys being part of the Seaside American Legion and having that connection to other veterans.

“We don’t sit around — or at least I don’t sit around — telling war stories, because I don’t have any war stories,” he said. “But it’s nice to be with a group, because we’re a minority. Most people aren’t veterans. That period of your life sticks with you, even though you left it 60 years ago ... There are 55,000 of my generation that never got to go past their younger years, because they died. And many of the others were injured. It was a tough war.”

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Slab Slabinski, often seen wearing a sweater printed with ‘Coast Guard,’ spent 20 years in the service, underway on ships and flying medevacs. His service took him to Alaska, Michigan and finally Astoria, where he retired in 2002.

SLAB SLABINSKI, WARRENTON

Being an Air Force brat whose older brother served in the U.S. Coast Guard, Slab Slabinski knew from a young age he would join one of those services. In March 1982, eight months after graduating high school, he was a Coastie in boot camp and he knew he’d made the right decision.

“Our main mission was to save lives, and that was very important to me.”

Over the next 20 years, Slabinski traveled to Alaska, Michigan and Astoria, spending time on ships, helicopters and in medical clinics as a health services technician.

“Flying medevacs, you had to see some really messed-up people,” he said. “Some of them stick with me. And injuring myself on a medevac doing CPR — that’s why my back’s all messed up. I was doing CPR off of Grace Harbor, and it was hairy-looking, just looking into basically a dead man’s open eyes. It’s just awful. And you never, ever forget that.”

Growing up in a military family, which included two sisters in the Air Force, Slabinski had a good idea of what to expect in terms of military life — expectations that were reinforced during his own time in the service.

“A lot of times, we wouldn’t know when my dad would be back. Or when he got back, how long he would be staying. It was weird, and I know it was weird on him,” Slabinski said. The same was true when he was in the Coast Guard and stationed on a ship that was deployed 280-plus days per year. It created “a new normal,” he said.

The camaraderie with close military friends helped make the situation bearable.

“When you’re that close to people day in and day out, you develop a bond, for good or bad,” he said. “It’s something that happens. It helps you get through those tough times, especially being underway on a ship ... I’m still close to a few of my military friends. Most of the ones I had from back when I was a very young Coastie.”

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