

Local war veterans share stories

Written by Chris Lee

Veterans Day is a day to remember those who have served and currently are serving the United States of America in armed forces all around the world.

Every veteran has a unique story about their time spent serving the country. Unfortunately not every story can be told at once. The Enterprise staff has taken on the task of gathering information about area veterans, both alive and deceased, about their time spent in the service. Names, dates served, branch of military and other information can be found in a special tribute in this week's print edition.

Three veterans have generously shared a part of their stories while fighting for the United States in World War II and Vietnam. They include John Smith, Max Jinkens and George Thomas.

John Smith

Describing himself as mean and ornery while in the service, John Smith of Holyoke has many stories from his time spent in Vietnam. Many veterans from Vietnam, as well as other wars, don't feel comfortable discussing what they experienced. Smith said telling his stories doesn't bother him. Actually, he enjoys it.

Two days after his high school graduation from Crook, Smith began his basic training in California. He completed his airborne and ranger training at Fort Benning in Georgia.

During a holdover in Fort Ord, Calif. it was found Smith was a shooting expert. The officers took Smith to shoot against Marines at the base in San Diego.

The 101st Airborne Ranger went to war December of 1969 thinking he would be pumping gas like what he was taught while at Fort Lee in Virginia. Upon arrival, Smith said he spent eight hours in a foxhole as missiles began hitting the tarmac.

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When he went to get his orders, he was told they had too many guys trained for pumping gas. Smith was told to go over to a helicopter and wait for the pilots.

The helicopter took off north and landed at Camp Evans, a place Smith said was about as far north as one would go. He was told he was going to be a full-fledged door gunner operating M60s.

Smith remembers asking, "What's a door gunner?"

"I had no idea, I had no training for it," he said.

He was given some time to train because he knew he could shoot but didn't know about shooting out of a helicopter. He remembers asking the pilots if he could practice with water buffalo, as he remembered seeing some as he flew into the camp. He was immediately told that wasn't going to happen.

After about 11-12 hours of training on old vehicles and steel plates, he spent two days flying and dropping troops off in the bushes. After those two days, he was told he was going to be flying with an Army Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) General. Smith's home base was Kasan, which was on top of a mountain and separated North Vietnam, South Vietnam and Laos.

His helicopter was marked with a big blue No. 1. Smith said people knew about the Big Blue 1 or "BB1" as it was dubbed, when he answered questions about who he flew with. He quickly learned he would've been better off back as the door gunner in the bushes. He said the new assignment involved more danger.

Within that next year, Smith said he was shot down seven times. He only lost one crew chief. He had two pilots, one of which was from Burlington.

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Smith remembers they found some time for fun during the war. They would give a little money to Vietnamese children on the banks of the ocean and tell them to take sand bags and fill them with whatever surfaced after they dropped grenades from the helicopter into the water.

He remembers flying out to the Navy ships to give them the food they gathered from the ocean. They would go back a couple days later and the ships' kitchen crews would have it all cooked up for them.

For his last six months overseas, Smith served on recon patrol. This entailed setting up for ambushes. They would walk during the day to find a place to set up for an ambush. They wouldn't actually set up until after dark.

Smith remembers one particular time when he was sitting there in the complete darkness and felt something grab his gun. The butt of his gun came up and hit him in the face. He decided to shoot not knowing what he was shooting at. When daylight came, it turned out a mongoose had been the one messing with him.

Another memory from flying was seeing the ground from above. Smith said one day they were flying and he noticed the grass on the ground was a different color in one area. To him this meant something was buried there. He said once you tear up grass, bury something and then replace the grass, it is going to be a different color. Sure enough, the ground troops investigated it and dug up six brand new Case tractors.

This was just another of many memories from the war.

Smith credits his father and his strict parenting for helping him get through the war. Today, Smith still thinks about the guys he served with that didn't come home. He also enjoys going to the cemetery and seeing Jack Wieland play his trumpet.

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Max Jinkens

Max Jinkens was born and raised in Holyoke. He attended grade school at Amitie school. In fact, he was born just a quarter of a mile from the school house.

He grew up on what was known as the Amitie Ranch 12.5 miles southeast of Holyoke. His father, Walter Sr., worked for Bill Heginbotham for 21 years, according to Jinkens. Jinkens was one of 10 children to Walter and Ollie. He only remembers five siblings as four had died prior to his birth.

“I know everybody in Phillips County I think,” he laughed.

On Oct. 11, 1944, Jinkens boarded a bus with 51 other men from Phillips County. He remembers it being parked in the middle of the street in downtown Holyoke as they loaded it. Out of the 52, three of them including Jinkens, Ken Olsen and Darryl Shur. went to the Navy. The rest went to the Army, Marines and other branches.

Jinkens attended boot camp in Farragut, Idaho before going to Camp Shoemaker in California. He then boarded the USS Mount Olympus, a communications ship. It was a GC8 ship and the flagship of the third amphibious 7th fleet. Jinkens served as a 3rd class carpenter's mate.

The ship went all through the Philippines, Japan, Yokohama, Tokyo and then to Shanghai, China.

Jinkens recalls running into a Holyoke native while in Yokohama, something that was pretty rare. He had just gotten off the ship and was walking towards town when he ran into Nevill Sprague. “That’s the only guy I saw from Holyoke the entire time I was gone,” Jinkens said. He said it was great to get back and see everyone who had served in the war. “We just had a great time after we got home,” Jinkens said.

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Jinkens' older brother Sam was killed in action Oct. 21, 1944 in Leyte. Max recalls seeing where he was buried when he was there but after returning to the U.S., Jinkens' family had his brother's body brought back and a military funeral was held.

Jinkens returned to the United States June of 1946. Upon returning, he worked for the Sprague brothers, Garland Auto and Les Lutze. He then ventured to California where he worked in the West Covina School District for 30 years. After retiring from the school he went to work for a felt factory for seven years.

In 1991 he moved back to Holyoke where he helped run the trailer park before moving to Sterling in 1999. He and wife Joyce have a daughter, two granddaughters and a great-grandson.

"I enjoyed being in the service," Jinkens said. "We learned a lot of things and they were all good."

Jinkens said his two brothers were in the service at the same time he was and noted that was pretty common with many area families.

"I enjoyed being in the Navy and was really happy when I got home," the veteran said.

He joined the VFW in 1946 and also belongs to the Legion in Sterling. Jinkens has enjoyed woodcraft, fishing and hunting throughout the years.

George Thomas

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It's not every day someone runs into a veteran who has been involved with a war the way George Thomas has. During and after World War II, Thomas was a Merchant Marine, was in the Air Force as well as the Army. "A lot has happened to me over the years," Thomas said.

Thomas grew up in Holyoke where he lived half of his life. The other half he spent in France.

He attended basic training at Catalina Island off the coast of California where he was taught how to save himself in the event of his ship being sunk. He was awarded officer status but never sailed as an officer, he said.

He boarded a Liberty ship that was in charge of carrying ammunition where he worked in the engine room. Later he boarded a C1 ship and served as a fireman under the deck.

"It's a wonder we didn't ever sink," Thomas said. He explained that his ship only had one small 20mm gun on it and they never knew when a submarine would appear. "We knew they were out there but never saw one," he noted.

Thomas has been on every continent except for Australia, he said. "I've been close to Australia but never on it," he said. Being so involved with different military branches gave him the opportunity to visit many different places.

Thomas recalls he never "saw" the end of the war. He never saw celebration or anything. They were leaving the Philippines when they were told the war was over, but in fact it wasn't.

Another interesting fact from the war was he has been through the Panama Canal but has never seen it. As a fireman, he was forced to stay in the bottom of his ship and didn't see outside as they made their way through it.

After his time as a Merchant Marine, Thomas and a couple friends were in New Orleans and decided to join the Air Force. Part of their decision was to go through it together. However, in

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the end, they each went in a different direction.

Thomas recalls being on a bomber plane with two engines flying overseas to Europe when an engine failed. The working engine carried them to Ireland where they safely landed.

Thomas noted there were also some Russians at the airstrip where they landed. They were told not to interfere with the them as Ireland didn't want that violence there.

When Thomas joined the Army, he completed basic training in California and then headed back to Europe. He met and married a French woman and lived there for nearly 40 years before moving back to the United States.

Thomas said when he first finished serving, he couldn't talk about the war to anyone. Now, it's a different story. He enjoys sitting down with just about anyone and chatting about the war and furthermore, the early Holyoke years.

Thomas said he is glad to have served and realizes he has done and been through a lot.