

Former Mayor Has Military Past

Newspaper Article by Frank Samandari

How does a self-described 'draft dodger' end up with more than 28 years of military service? It's a question Tom Walters gets asked nearly every week. The former Oviedo, Florida mayor joined Air Force ROTC at San Diego State University as a way to avoid the Army draft, which was in place during the Vietnam War.

"Even though I didn't want to fight in the jungles of Vietnam, I still thought military service was important," Walters says.

First Things First

He decided he needed to finish college before signing on with the military. At that time, most young men drafted were sent into the Army and ended up on the front lines. Walters says he saw what being forced into adulthood did to his grandfather, and wanted to avoid that fate.



"He went to college and didn't relate to any of his schoolmates. He'd fought in the War. So he ended up not completing college."

Uncle Sam Calls

Following graduation, Walters went into flight training and earned the rank of Second Lieutenant in the Air Force. He says his tours never took him directly into Vietnam, but he did fly over Thailand and some southeastern Asian countries in the region — including Laos and Cambodia. Throughout his nearly three decade military history, Walters saw three combat missions, serving in the United Arab Emirates in 1993 during the first Gulf War, in addition to his Vietnam-era hitch.

A Tradition of Service

Walters was born in Milwaukee, but grew up in Southern California. His father served in the Navy during World War Two and an uncle also served in that war. His grandfather served in the first World War. One of his two sons has recently completed a four-year commitment to the military, and both his father-in-law and brother-in-law have seen active duty.

"From my personal experience and the experiences of those I've observed, serving is more often than not a family value. It becomes a family tradition."

That tradition continues to this day. Many of those now fighting the War on Terror can trace their military roots back to the Second World War and beyond. Walters says the fact that all the men and women currently serving signed up by their own volition (instead of being drafted) is something they should be proud of.

"Today's military is all volunteer. That's significant."

A New Chapter

Walters has been retired from active duty for eight years now, but says he has never lost his passion for public service. After his military retirement, he served as mayor of Oviedo and was heavily involved with the Air Force ROTC program at the University of Central Florida, and the Junior Navy ROTC program at Oviedo High School. He is still an active member of the Central Florida Veteran's Association.

“My neighbor next door and my neighbor across the street are both retired Air Force,” Walters says. “We intentionally bought our properties in Florida together.”

Another former comrade Walters knew from his service in Thailand lives in the same neighborhood.

Walters says even now he attends retirement ceremonies at MacDill Air Force Base near Tampa Bay. At one of those ceremonies, a former cadet he had mentored singled Walters out as one of his inspirations during his time in the Air Force.