

30 DAYS OF HONOR ★ *A Salute to Local Vets*

‘So many people were against the war’

Weston's Bernie Knippel volunteered for Vietnam

By Dan Richter
For Gannett Central Wisconsin Media

WESTON — Bernie Knippel was just a 17-year-old Wausau boy when he joined the U.S. Air Force in 1955.

Knippel, now 76, received many decorations during his military career, including the Bronze Star, which he was awarded in 1971 for his service in Vietnam.

“I was always interested in the military and watched a lot of things happening in Korea. I just thought joining was the right thing to do,” said Knippel of his decision to enlist.

Knippel is preparing now to take a Never Forgotten Honor Flight and looking back at his military career, which spanned more than 25 years.

Q: What did you do in the service and where were you stationed?

Answer: I spent three years in Okinawa, did two tours of duty in Korea, spent one year in Vietnam and three years in England. I was a first sergeant, which basically means I was the commander's adviser to the troops and helped maintain discipline.

Q: What is your most enduring memory from your time in the service?

A: My year in Vietnam sticks out the most. Being a dedicated military man, I volunteered to go there because I thought it was the right thing to do, in service of my country. I was there from 1970 to 1971 and remember being in their rocket attacks and facing occasional fire. It was a complete war zone.

Q: What do you most want people



PHOTOS BY DAN YOUNG/GANNETT CENTRAL WISCONSIN MEDIA
Bronze Star winner and United States Air Force veteran Bernard Knippel stands in front of his military memorabilia at his Weston home on Wednesday.



Bernie Knippel's car is decorated with a United States Air Force 1st Sergeant rank patch, a memento of his career in the Air Force.

ABOUT BERNIE KNIPPEL

Name: Bernie Knippel
Age: 76
Residence: Weston
Conflict involved in: Vietnam War
Military branch: United States Air Force
Years of service: 1955 to 1981
Rank upon discharge: E8 first sergeant

to know about the conflict in which you served?

A: I think it was a tough time when we all came back because so many people were against the war. People need to understand that we were there to serve at the call of our country. We had no choice but to serve when we're asked. As career military people, that's what we do and what we train for.

Q: Tell us about your life after the service and how your time in the military affected your civilian life.

A: After I retired from the Air Force I got a degree in criminal justice and worked for the government at an Air Force base for years before moving back to Wisconsin in 1997.

Discipline is certainly one thing I learned, as well as respect for others. While in the Air Force I was able to help and guide a lot of younger people. When you have 700 enlisted men under your direction, it's not easy; it's a 24-hour, seven-days-a-week job.

Q: What do you hope going on an Honor Flight trip will do for you and why are you looking forward to it?

A: I've never seen the (Vietnam Memorial) wall. I know it was here a few years back when the Man of Honor Society brought it here, but I missed it at the time. It's just something that I need to see. That conflict is something we never want to forget.



A FLIGHT TO NEVER FORGET

» The Central Wisconsin chapter of Never Forgotten Honor Flight celebrates its fifth anniversary this spring. Since April 2011, the Honor Flight program has flown to Washington, D.C. with more than 800 local World War II veterans, as well as dozens more who served in Korea and Vietnam, to allow them to view the memorials built for those wars.
» 30 Days of Honor is a project of Gannett Central Wisconsin Media to profile veterans who have taken an Honor Flight, or are scheduled, and to encourage more veterans to do so. Profiles will appear each day April 26 through Memorial Day.
» Veterans may apply for a free Honor Flight (or loved ones may apply for them) by filling out an application. The only qualification for a veteran to take an Honor Flight is to have served in any branch of the U.S. military during the periods of World War II, the Korean War or Vietnam War. Veterans do not have to have been in combat. The applications and more information are available at <http://www.neverforgottenhonorflight.org>

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