



North Florida/South Georgia Veterans Health System

The first in a series of articles highlighting and celebrating Vietnam Veterans in advance of Vietnam Veterans Day 2019 and the North Florida Vietnam Veterans Tribute and Ride 2019; Words and Pictures Dan Henry, NF/SG Veterans Health System Public Affairs

BELLEVUE, FL - Tom Equels is a busy guy. He serves as CEO of an immunology research and development company working hard toward finding a better way to treat solid tumor cancers.



Thomas Kenwood Equels, 66, stands near his painting of St. Teresa, the patron saint of the parish church he attends - Our Lady of St. Teresa Catholic Church in Belleview, FL. The painting is one of many the Vietnam Veteran and former Cobra gunship pilot has rendered and gifted at no charge to groups and people in his community and beyond. Photo Credit Dan Henry, VA Public Affairs

He operates a 100-acre thoroughbred horse farm where he raises 17 of his own animals, including several newborns — and another 75 horses who board on his property.

And, when the former Army Aviation Branch Chief Warrant Officer and Vietnam Cobra gunship pilot is not multitasking from those two, he oversees fundraisers for his local Catholic church, is grandfather to three rambunctious boys and is an artist.

A rather accomplished artist in fact.

His oil paintings grace the walls of Our Lady of St. Teresa Catholic Church of Belleview, Florida and numerous other public and church offices and places of worship as far away as the United Kingdom.

He doesn't charge for the beautifully detailed work. He simply does them out on open-ended loans for the enjoyment of those who see them.

Until recently, one such office was the Orlando address for U.S. Senator Bill Nelson. The piece, called 'Lest We Forget,' is a beautiful tribute to a fallen friend whom Equels both trained to fly with and served with during the same period in Vietnam. With Nelson's retirement following the recent elections, the 66-year-old artist and Purple Heart recipient thought it appropriate to share his work with former service members at The Villages, FL VA Outpatient Clinic where he receives care.

Equels, who spent much of his childhood in Florida, is a self-taught painter. He came up with the idea for the painting, which features Army Warrant Officer pall bearers folding the stars and stripes that had been draped over the casket of his friend, Army Warrant Officer and helicopter pilot Mickey Allen Wilson, after reading an article in the Orlando Sentinel. The article was written about the remains of a pilot and his crew who were recovered in the Republic of Vietnam after being Missing In Action for over 28 years. The article also mentioned the burial in Arlington National Cemetery.

After meeting another Veteran from his unit at the funeral, it occurred to Equels that other than the two of them and Wilson's elderly parents, no one else would be on hand to remember his old friend.

"The painting, for me, was about closure," Equels says. "We first met in flight school in Fort Rucker, Alabama, but almost thirty years had passed. Time flows on but people make sacrifices and people are forgotten. I'm sure if people knew they would have been there, but the passage of time impacts that."

Equels took about two years off-and-on to complete the original oil painting; with the final print being digitally captured with assistance from his daughter, who is both an artist herself as well as an expert in digital printing. When he was finished, he donated the piece to Senator Nelson's office so the world could see the tribute to his friend and all other fallen service members.

"I think for me, art is supposed to help other people feel things. Folks coming here [to the VA] have served and were wounded and lost friends in combat. This gives them a place to reflect on lost comrades and the ultimate sacrifice they've given," Equels says.

Equels graduated from Titusville High School in 1970 and volunteered to go to warrant officer flight training immediately – completing Basic training at Fort Polk, Kentucky, then helicopter training at Fort Wolters, Texas and later in Alabama.

Equels graduated at the top of his flight training class and was given the choice to pick his type of helicopter and decided on Cobra gunships. He went to Vietnam in January of 1972 and was in-country through January 1973; while there he flew more than 300 missions. In spring of 1972 he received word that his helicopter school class mate Wilson, along with his flight crew, went down in the aftermath of a blunted North Vietnamese offensive that included five of their divisions. The flight crew was listed as missing until 2000.

After Vietnam, Equels was asked to become an instructor and stayed in the Army. This opportunity to stay in the Army after returning from war was a blessing. It allowed him to complete a bachelors and master's degree while on active duty, and gave him a period to adjust in a structured military environment to life after Vietnam, a chance that many Veterans never got.



Images from Equels' time as a young Warrant Officer in Vietnam. Equels would go on more than 300 missions during his year-long stint from 1972 through 1973. Photos Courtesy Thomas K. Equels

"I was not quite 21 when the peace treaty was signed in 1973, and most of my contemporaries were being released from service in a reduction in force because the war was over. I was fortunate because the army asked me to stay on and become an instructor pilot," Equels says. "You have to remember, the typical Veteran came from combat in Vietnam to American civilian life separated only by a very long airplane ride. I thought it would be best for me to stay in

for a few years and work on my education. This gave me a period to decompress and adjust. It gave me the structure to function, grow and transition.

"A lot of folks went from the military straight onto the streets. Not everyone, especially those with combat only occupational specialties, had training that could help them get civilian jobs. Raw wartime expertise doesn't always translate well in the civilian office environment. Those combat skills aren't civilian commodities and the combat attitude wasn't always compatible with civil society. I had to change my attitude and skill set to be successful."

It could certainly be argued that Equels has been successful since his time in the service.

After finishing law school at Florida State University, Equels became a member of the Florida Bar and worked as an attorney in South Florida with a focus on helping those in need and championing issues of social justice. He moved from Miami back to Central Florida in the early 1990's where he and his wife Laura purchased the first few acres of what would eventually become a huge horse farm on the outskirts of Florida's thoroughbred breeding capital, Ocala. His expansive property even includes a horse racing track for trainers to practice with their race horses and prepare them for competition at Tampa Bay Downs and Gulfstream Park.

A few years ago, an interest in investing brought his attention to a bio pharmaceutical company named Hemispherx. The company had a focus on creating immunology medicines. His belief in the work the company was doing, a belief partially informed by the experiences of service members feeling the impacts of Agent Orange years later, grew his interest from merely investing to becoming a member of the board and



A Harley Davidson enthusiast who somehow finds time to take long rides even with his ever busy life. Equels plans to ride his 2005 Road King in the North Florida Vietnam Veterans Tribute in Gainesville, FL on March 30, 2019. Photo Credit Dan Henry, VA Public Affairs

becoming CEO - where he initiated a focus on 'immuno-oncology,' seeking to cure the same tumors that Agent Orange creates.

"I can't tell you how many Veterans have died of Agent Orange-related cancers," Equels says. "Many of the pilots from my unit have come down with and have died from Agent Orange-related cancer. Immune system therapies can cure cancer. We are working on activating the immune system to cure these cancers. This is a tremendous opportunity to make an impact and save lives. What we are creating is something for everyone, but it can be particularly helpful to Vietnam Vets."

With the upcoming North Florida Vietnam Veterans Tribute, and his desire to honor the memory of his good friend, Equels, who somehow finds spare time to take long rides on his 2005 Harley Davidson Road King motorcycle, found himself reflecting on his life and the experiences he shared with fellow Veterans in Vietnam - and the opportunity to join in with them as they are honored and publicly welcomed home.

"I was very young when I was there [Vietnam], but a lot of who we become...good and bad...is formed in war," Equels notes. "For me it was

either grow from that combat experience or be broken by it.

"I can remember being in court and arguing a case and dealing with great stress and pressures," Equels says. "Then, I would think back on some of those tough days in Vietnam and remember that I've been through a whole lot worse. I put those things in perspective and whenever I was having a difficult day I'd remember. I just take a deep breath and remember this civilian experience is nothing compared to the crucible of combat.

“Like with all lives, there’s a mix of success and failure. I came out of the Army with a very strong idea of what my destiny was and with the attitude that if I had good ideas and worked at them, I’d triumph. Much of that I owe to the Army; I wasn’t afraid to move forward. A lot of people have talent but they don’t make progress because they’re afraid to try. The military taught me to be unafraid, to try things,” Equels says.

“I think this particular celebration is a beautiful thing. Many who served did so at a time when there was obligation and duty to serve yet a large part of the population was opposed to the war and it was not uncommon that Vets serving in Vietnam were treated with disrespect. The idea that Veterans from the Vietnam era are receiving public thanks helps them to realize that their service is respected and appreciated.”

Equels tribute painting for his friend was installed at the VA Outpatient Clinic in The Villages, Florida in a special ceremony at 11:00 AM on Tuesday, March 19, 2019.

He’ll go kick stands up with Vietnam Veterans starting at the Malcom Randall VA Medical Center in Gainesville, Florida and continuing to the Alachua County Veterans Memorial Park on Saturday at 9:30 AM on Saturday, March 30, 2019.

All are welcome to join him.

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The North Florida Vietnam Veterans Tribute 2019 is a joint initiative of the US Department of Veterans North Florida/South Georgia Veterans Health System, Alachua County Florida Veterans Services and multiple community and Veterans Service Organizations and volunteers to honor the Vietnam Veterans Community of North Central Florida, South Georgia and beyond. The tribute will feature a law enforcement escorted motorcycle ride through Gainesville, FL and a special event at the Alachua County Veterans Memorial Park which will include live entertainment and a replica of the Vietnam Wall. All are invited to attend and honor and welcome home America’s Vietnam Veterans. For more information on attending the event or volunteering, please visit

www.vietnamveterantribute.org