A black and white photograph showing the silhouettes of several people, likely veterans, against a bright, overcast sky. They are all holding mobile phones to their ears, suggesting they are in contact with each other or with family. The overall mood is one of connection and communication.

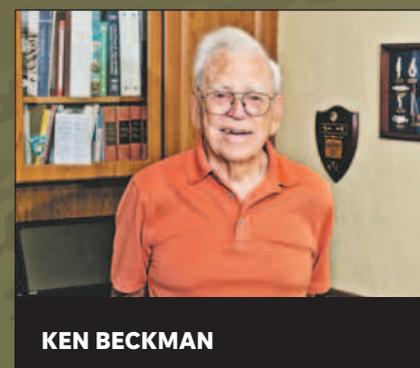
# UNFINISHED BUSINESS

Years after their service, veterans return to theater in search of remembrance, relationships, resolution

By Matt Alderton

**THOSE WHO ARE ATTRACTED** to military service often speak of it as a “calling.” As an impetus for enlistment, however, civic duty tells only part of the story, according to RAND, a Santa Monica, Calif.-based research institute. Earlier this year, it surveyed soldiers and found that many of the participants — 41 percent — enlisted in the Army to pursue travel, adventure and new experiences.

As many veterans can attest, however, the romantic notions that attract people to military service don’t always manifest. In addition to meeting people from different cultures, they often must fight them under extreme circumstances. There may be some scenery and sights, but there are also bases and battlefields. There is adventure, but there also is anxiety and fear. But years after their service, some veterans feel an itch they have to scratch. Older, wiser and under much improved circumstances, they return to the theaters in which they fought.



**KEN BECKMAN**

Beckman, a WWII Air Force veteran, took a tour of Britain’s American Air Museum — and a B-17 — to reminisce.

### WORLD WAR II VETERAN RELIVES ‘FOND MEMORIES’

World War II veteran **Ken Beckman** was 18 when he first experienced heartfelt national pride, the source of which was Japan’s 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor. “In 1942, as soon as I was old enough, I decided to go into the Aviation Cadet Program (within the U.S. Army Air Forces),” recalled Beckman, 96, of St. Petersburg, Fla., who flew 48 missions spanning two tours of duty as a navigator aboard a B-17 bomber.

After the war, Beckman spent 30 years as a career airman during which time he flew in both the Korean and First Indochina wars. The Air Force kept him so busy, he said, that he “pretty much came home and forgot about” World War II. Upon retiring decades later, however, his memories loomed larger. He recalled, for example, a mission over Belgium during which his bombardier missed the target: an airport. Months later, Beckman’s plane was hit over Cologne and

had to make an emergency landing at the same airport. One mission’s failure was another’s saving grace.

Beckman decided to revisit such memories firsthand in April 2018, when he joined the National WWII Museum’s “Masters of the Air” guided tour of East Anglia, which included lectures by historian Donald L. Miller, author of *Masters of Air: America’s Bomber Boys Who Fought the Air War*

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**FRANCIS J. "CHUCK" THEUSCH**

Theusch, who served in Vietnam, was so moved by the people of the region that he's built 34 libraries in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos through his nonprofit, Children's Library International.

*Against Nazi Germany.* During the weeklong trip, participants toured the English countryside where British and American bombers were stationed, including surviving air bases such as Rougham Airfield, where Beckman spent Christmas Eve 1944.

"We had bombed near the Battle of the Bulge and the weather in England was so bad that there was only one base open," recalled Beckman, whose tour group was greeted by local villagers, including a man who was just 13 years old in 1944. "He remembers 96 airplanes landing at his base because the weather was so poor elsewhere. We had an excellent discussion thinking back to that particular day."

Conversations like that are exactly what lured Beckman back to England. "I just wanted to relive the feelings I had at the time," he said. "And I did. It rekindled in me some very fond memories."

Beckman's trip wasn't about resolution; it was about remembrance. "What (veterans) get out of these trips is a really deep appreciation for what was accomplished in World War II," said National WWII Museum Director of Educational Travel Nathan Huegen. "It becomes a celebration of the American spirit."

### VIETNAM VETERAN REPLACES WAR WITH WISDOM

Kids who grow up on farms learn the value of hard work and the importance of patience. If you ask Milwaukee-based Vietnam War veteran **Francis J. "Chuck" Theusch** however, the most important thing that his dairy-farm upbringing taught him was empathy.

When he deployed to Vietnam in December 1969, Theusch took what he calls his "farmer's sensitivity." One night, for instance, he was assigned to guard prisoners of war at Đức Phô Base Camp in Quang Ngãi Province, where he was based. "The guys outside the wire were supposed to be our friends, and the guys inside were supposed to be our enemies. But they looked the same to me," said Theusch, now 67, who was an infantryman in the U.S. Army's 23rd Infantry "Americal" Division. "At 18 years old, that's a hard thing to work out."

That he so easily saw others' humanity left Theusch with a looming regret after the war. "We never had the chance to get to know the people," he said. "That really bothered me, and it's what eventually took me back."

Theusch returned to Vietnam for the first time on Dec. 8, 1999 — 30 years to the day

after he first landed there. It was supposed to be the first stop on a world tour. Instead, it turned into something else entirely.

Because he wanted to ingratiate himself with locals, Theusch purchased two water buffalo — highly prized by Vietnamese farmers — as a gift for families in Đức Phô. When severe flooding delayed their delivery, however, he found himself discussing with his Vietnamese guide other ways to make a difference. What poor villages really needed, he learned, were libraries. So, he canceled the rest of his trip and used the money to design and build a library in Quang Ngãi Province — the first of 34 libraries he's since funded in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos through Children's Library International, his nonprofit.

Built with individual and corporate contributions, the libraries cost \$35,000 apiece and are stocked with books, periodicals and Wi-Fi-enabled computers that empower, educate and enrich the lives of local citizens.

"Americans have an ability to bridge the gulf that's created by war quicker and better than anyone else on Earth," concluded Theusch, who said the United States has a long history of cleaning up after its wars. "We did it with

the Confederacy after the Civil War. We did it with the Marshall Plan after World War II. We did it in South Korea after the Korean War. I'm just trying to carry on that American tradition."

### IRAQ WAR VETERAN TRADES WAR FOR WILDERNESS

For **Stacy Bare**, war killed his friends, branded his mind with horrific images and saddled him with baggage he'll carry for the rest of his life, including a head injury, anxiety, a substance abuse problem and suicidal thoughts. And yet, the Iraq War veteran doesn't regret his service; sometimes, he actually misses it.

"There's a lot of amazing things that happen in war," said Bare, 40, of Sandy, Utah. "It gives you camaraderie and a sense of purpose."

When his service ended, losing those things set him adrift. "I didn't know how to adjust," said Bare, who was an officer in the U.S. Army from 2000 until 2007, during which time he served in Germany, Bosnia and Iraq. "That struggle ultimately was characterized as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)."

Bare found that being outside was the best therapy for his PTSD and began rock climbing in 2009. At first, he loved it because it reminded him of the Army; he felt the same fellowship and purpose on mountains that he felt in the military. Eventually, however, he realized his attraction to nature was rooted in peace, not war.

"For me, the outdoors is a place where my perceptions about other people vanish," said Bare, who subsequently conceived a personal project he now calls *Adventure Not War*. The premise is simple: He promotes outdoor recre-

ation as a means to world peace by returning to countries where the U.S. has had a military presence — this time as a tourist seeking adventure instead of a soldier engaged in combat.

"I want to use the outdoors as a vehicle to highlight our common humanity across the globe," said Bare, who returned to Iraq with two other veterans in February 2017. Their journey — documented in the film *Adventure Not War* — took them to the snowy slopes of Mt. Halgurd, in the Zagros Mountains of northern Iraq. There, they skied, hiked and socialized with locals just a few hours from Mosul, where U.S. and Iraqi forces were engaged in a fierce military campaign against ISIS.

"It was weird," Bare said. "I landed at Erbil International Airport and walked out into the early morning air. It looked like Iraq, and it smelled like Iraq, but I didn't have a weapon, and I wasn't in protective gear. Instead of getting into a Humvee, I hired a cab."

What began with odd feelings ended with inspiring ones. "The Zagros mountain range is a gorgeous, beautiful mountain range that in some ways re-

minded me of the Wasatch Range — my home range in Utah, which has given me and my family endless hours of peace and frustration and joy," concluded Bare, whose perception of Iraq was permanently changed by the view — sparkling instead of smoldering. "That's ultimately why I went back. To experience the beauty of the planet we live on and the humanity we all share. Because the reality is these people are incredibly similar to you and me. They have the same basic dreams and hopes and aspirations. The outdoors breaks that down so we can see each other more clearly, more honestly and more kindly."



STACY BARE

Above, Bare poses with Iraqi children. Below, Bare with his team on the top of Mt. Halgurd.

## TRAVELING WITH TRAUMA

For veterans, "remembrance travel" can heal long-festering wounds. Just as easily, however, it can reopen them — especially for those with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which could be triggered or exacerbated by visiting the locus of their trauma, according to Drs. Paula Schnurr and Sonya Norman, psychologists at the National Center for PTSD within the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Which is why it behooves veterans to pack their mental suitcases before picking up physical ones, advised Schnurr and Norman.

► **Set realistic expectations:** "You can't really control what happens once you're there," said Norman, director of the center's PTSD Consultation Program, who recommends discussing with a therapist why you want to go, what you hope to achieve and how things might turn out.

► **Treat your trauma:** Veterans traveling with the intent of resolving past trauma should first seek professional help. "There are evidence-based treatments for PTSD that help people recover from the after effects of trauma," explained Norman.

► **Talk to travelers:** Seek counsel from veterans who have previously engaged in remembrance travel, or read about their experiences online.

► **Pack coping mechanisms:** Think about what helps you cope with stress at home, then do it abroad. "For some people it might be journaling or going for a run. Or maybe there's a loved one who can go with you to help you deal with difficult situations," suggested Norman.

► **Stay in touch:** Support networks are critical for people facing stressful situations. If yours can't travel with you, stay in touch by phone, text or email. "Generally, talking is very helpful," Schnurr said. Veterans experiencing extreme stress also can contact the Veterans Crisis Line by calling 800-273-8255, texting 838255 or visiting [veteranscrisisline.net/chat](http://veteranscrisisline.net/chat). Keep in mind, however, that the line doesn't work in some locations overseas.

— Matt Alderton