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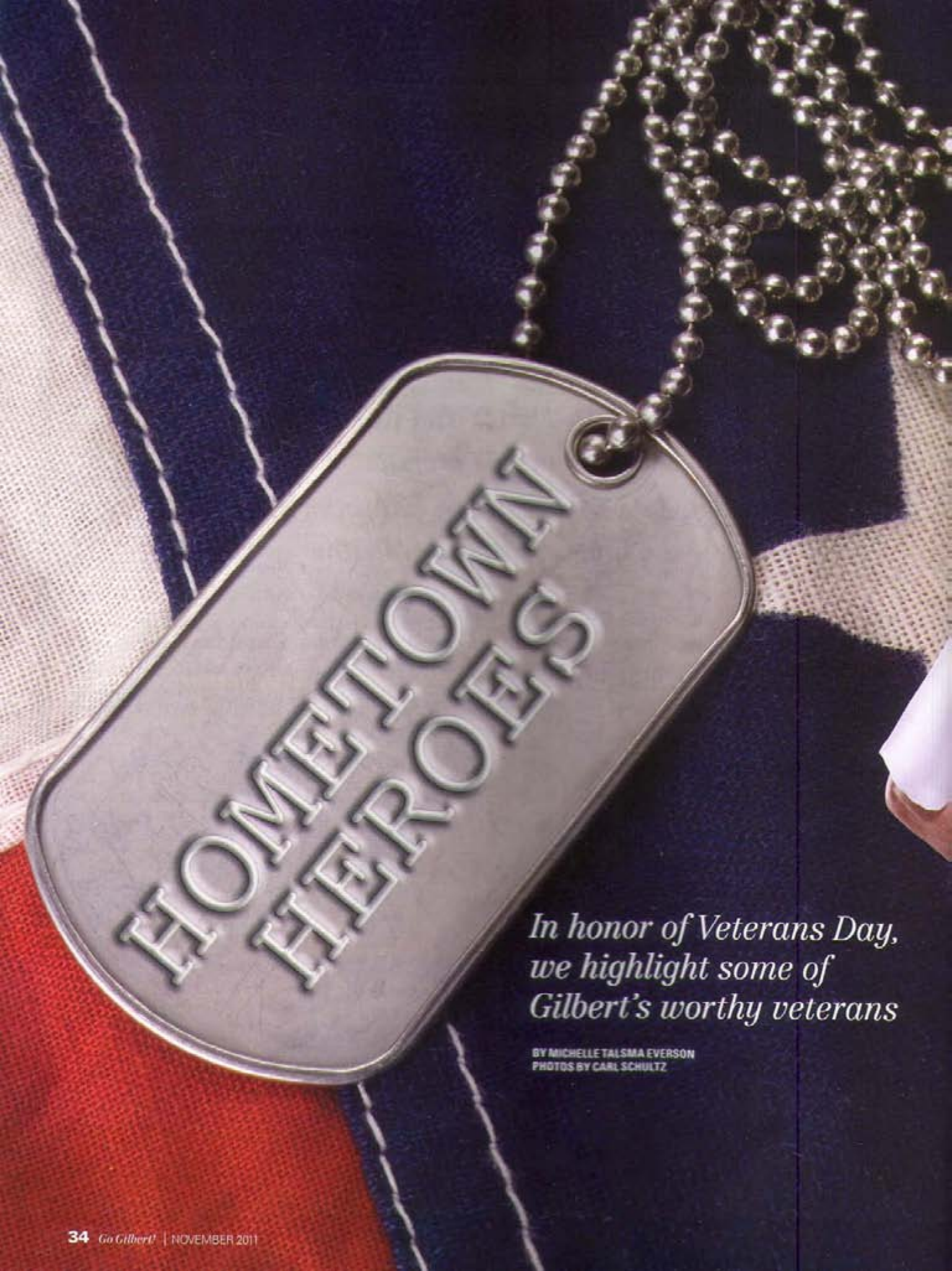

HOMETOWN HEROES

In honor of Veterans Day, we highlight some of Gilbert's worthy veterans

BY MICHELLE TALSMA EVERSON
PHOTOS BY CARL SCHULTZ

John Sentz, Naval Reserve

John Sentz's life is all about community service. For 34 years, he served as a captain in the Naval Reserve and, since 2009, has been involved as a member of the Gilbert Town Council. Add to that his service with the Gilbert Planning Commission, Gilbert Leadership program, and several non-profits, and it's obvious that Sentz has a knack for getting involved. In fact, he was inducted into the Arizona Veterans Hall of Fame in 2009 for his hours of volunteer service.

"I feel that I've been so fortunate with both my naval and civilian career—and since I've been a Gilbert resident since 1976—when I retired I wanted to give something back to the community," Sentz says. "I've had a great experience serving the town and hope that I've made some contributions to improve local government."

An Arizona State University (ASU) alum, Sentz served three years of active duty in the Navy, including a tour in Vietnam. After being released from active duty, he served three decades in the Naval Reserve while he worked a civilian job as a program manager for Motorola. Some of his military career highlights include supporting river patrol boats during his time in Vietnam and, as a Reserve captain, coordinating ship repairs that saved the Navy upwards of $3 million in costs.

"I got to enjoy the best of both worlds [military and civilian]," he says. "I worked my civilian job but was also a commanding officer of my Reserve unit. Now, I'm involved in the community and serve on several non-profit boards, too. It's all about community service."

Craig Jones, Marine Corps

Craig Jones was in high school when the 9/11 tragedy happened and now, as a veteran of the Marine Corps, he was an instrumental volunteer in helping to coordinate the Gilbert 9/11 Memorial this past September.

"I volunteer with the Gilbert Fire Department and thought it would be a good opportunity to be involved with the memorial," Jones says. "I was on the main events committee and helped to organize the military support day."

Jones served in the Marines from 2005-2010, including two tours in Iraq. Unfortunately, he was injured by an IED blast while serving in Fallujah, Iraq—but still says that he has no regrets.

"I would still go in; you learn about so many different areas and see and hear things you wouldn't otherwise," he says. "It was an eye-opening experience."

Despite his injury, Jones hopes to one day become a firefighter. He's currently going to Chandler-Gilbert Community College and plans on transferring to ASU to complete his fire science degree. In addition to school, he says he enjoys Gilbert's family atmosphere; he's an uncle and keeps busy working and volunteering.

"I'm glad I went into the military after high school, it was the perfect fit," Jones says. "It set me up for a lot of good things—I'm 25 and already have that experience under my belt."

David Milton, Air Force, and Steven Milton, Army

It's not surprising to see multiple members of the same family in the service. But, for one Gilbert family, the Miltons, they can trace their military lineage back to the American Revolution.

Still, both David Milton and his son Steven will admit that there was no pressure for Steven to join the Army—it was something that was his own personal choice.

The elder Milton made a career in the Air Force for more than 20 years, serving as a medic. He says that he didn't intend to build a career in the military, but one commander changed that.

"He [the commander] asked me what I was going to do when I got out; I didn't have an answer, so I re-enlisted," Milton explains. "I then went overseas to Europe and it was one of the best things that happened to me."

Milton married in 1986 while still in the Air Force and came to call Gilbert home because he was stationed nearby. A couple of his career highlights include being there as prisoners of war came home from Vietnam and being selected as a remote site medic—sometimes he was the only health care professional available to his fellow servicemen.

Having lived in Gilbert since the late '80s, Milton says that he has seen the community grow and change; and was involved with his sons' sports and other activities as they were growing up.

Still, he notes that one thing the military never prepared him for was sending his own son to war.

Steven, who is currently serving in the Army, enlisted in 2009 and says that being an Army police officer is something that he was born to do. Although he's only been in a short time, the young father has already experienced a tour in Iraq. He left when his son was 28-days-old and came back when he was 15-months-old.

"I'm still in shock mode; I am adapting to being a father and a husband," Steven says. "Deployment matures you quick and makes you stronger."

Steven is currently home, but says his bags are packed as he knows that he can be called back at any time. After he finishes serving, he plans on finishing his degree from ASU and hopes to become a police officer to serve his community.

"I'd like to send my gratitude out for all of the care packages I received while deployed," he says. "I know there were several groups, like a local Boy Scout troop, who did a lot for the troops. I'd like to thank the community for standing by the troops."

Earlier this year, Steven was honored by the Town of Gilbert at an Operation Welcome Home event.

David Milton, left, holds a shadow box with a photo and accolades earned by his grandfather, Harvey Milton, who served during World War I. Steven Milton, right, holds a shadow box showcasing honors earned by his grandfather, Charles Milton, who served 35 years in the Air Force.

Melvin Torres, Marine Corps Reserve

Originally from Illinois, Gilbert resident Melvin Torres always knew he wanted to be a Marine. In fact, he had spent eight years in service, was released, and then re-enlisted for four more.

As an airplane mechanic, among other duties, Torres spent time overseas, including serving in Iraq in 2005.

With a family history of military service, his experiences with the Marines taught him values and discipline that he still carries with him today.

"There's a certain attitude you have to have in the Marines; you have to have the mentality that anytime you can be called to go to war," Torres explains. "It's the Marines who often see combat; they're trained to go to war. It was still something I felt like I needed to do. I always wanted to be a Marine."

Torres says that serving overseas helped him to broaden his perspective and that he found it interesting to see how a different culture lived. In Iraq, his unit served as combat replacement support for the troops there and he says that he had a great experience with the people he served with, some of whom he still keeps in touch with.

Today, Torres, a father of two, works for GoDaddy.com and will finish his bachelor's degree in IT and telecommunications from the University of Phoenix in January. He enjoys his job and spending time with his kids.

"The discipline [that you learn in the Marines] goes everywhere with you and is in anything you do; you really have to experience it to understand," he says. "I still carry a lot of the values I learned in the Corps, just in more subtle ways."

David Gray, Army and Air Force National Guard

David Gray, a veteran of the Army and Air Force National Guard, says that the military changed his life dramatically. After all, during his time in service he got to see the world and married his wife (of now 36 years!). Inspired by an uncle who served in Vietnam, Gray enlisted in the Army a few years after his high school graduation and never looked back.

"I served in the active duty Army from 1974-1977 and then in the Air Force National Guard from 1990-1996," Gray explains. "I had a big gap in service because I just missed it and, ever since I got out, I wanted to be back in. The Reserves was a busy time; I was working, my son was little and had school activities, but I enjoyed it and don't regret it at all."

With a love for the cars, Gray worked in automotive supply while serving in the military and has worked in the industry for his civilian career as well. Always one to stay busy, he's been active with the local American Legion Post 39 for the past few years and is currently the Americanism Committee Chairperson.

"I teach youth about proper flag etiquette," he says. "I work with the legion because of the good work that they do for the soldiers, the different events with the youth, and their service to the community."

Besides his work with the legion, Gray is active in target shooting and enjoys spending time with his family, which includes his wife, son and three grandkids.

Joseph Heller, Army

As an aircraft mechanic in the Army for 27 years, Joseph Heller has been to 102 countries and says that the comradery, lasting friendships, and life-changing experiences all stand out when he looks back on his time in the service.

Originally from Chicago, he went into the military to earn money for college, but instead turned his experience and expertise into a lasting career. Having been deployed and seen combat, he knows from experience the toll that deployment can have on military families.

"Deployments are hard; you have to maintain two households," Heller explains. "Troops train for battle, but as my wife experienced, how do you train for being left alone? That's why family support groups are so important."

Today, Heller is busier than ever supporting other veterans and their families. He currently serves as the commander of the American Legion Post 39 and is also the military funeral coordinator for the state of Arizona.

"I coordinate military honors for all vets in the state," he says. "It's about recognizing their service and giving them their final send off. We do it as a service to their families and community."

From a military family himself, Heller fondly remembers when his father said that he was proud of him for serving. "I don't regret it [serving in the Army]; I'd do it all over again," he says.

When he has some down time, Heller likes to golf, travel and enjoys going out to eat.

Louie Contreras, Sr., Marines Corps

Phoenix native Louie Contreras, Sr. served in the Marine Corps from 1967-1970, during the Vietnam War. With a brother already in the Marines, he signed up during a time when many men his age were getting drafted.

While in Vietnam, Contreras saw heavy combat from his first day on patrol when he had an experience that caused his "survival mode to kick in." Contreras left the Marines forever changed and was officially diagnosed with PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) in 2003, though he likely had it for years before that. He says that, thanks to the help of a local veteran's center and other Vietnam vets, he "dealing with it [PTSD] day by day."

"I keep in touch with other veterans because a lot of other people don't understand," Contreras explains. "They're my 'Vietnam brothers.' When one passes, it's like losing family."

Despite his experiences, Contreras is proud to have served and would do it all over again. He makes sure to thank the younger generation of veterans for their service so they feel appreciated—something he says many troops coming home from Vietnam didn't feel. He's also involved in the Arizona Vietnam Veterans and Operation Freedom Bird, an effort that helps Arizona vets come to terms with their experiences and honor their fallen comrades. "I still support the troops; once a Marine, always a Marine," he says.

Added to that, he enjoys spending time with his loved ones, which includes three grown children and several grandkids, and has a passion for customizing cars.