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Fourth Generation Soldier

By Cathy Dausman



Patti Witalis holds her commission plaque, left, and diploma from Command and General Staff College. Photos provided Patrick enlisted.

Witalis said she pursued an army career "to follow my family culture and heritage."

Her mother, Lorraine, and her aunt Estelle served as army nurses in World War II; Witalis' father, Charles, was a naval aviator. Her uncles Joseph, Vincent, John and Silas, Jr. were on active duty during the Second World War. Witalis' maternal grandfather, the elder Silas (nicknamed "Chaps") was a cavalry officer during the Spanish American War and World War I.

Not surprisingly, Witalis even married in the army. Her husband, Roger Witalis, was a captain in the Medical Services Corps when they first met during officer training at Fort Sam Houston in Texas. Witalis' father-in-law served during World War II as a flight surgeon with an Italian-based B-24 squadron.

Shortly after they were married the newlyweds were transferred to Japan, where they remained until 1969. Witalis was discharged from active duty in December 1969 after giving birth to the first of her family's daughters. "I raised my children (then)," she said. In 1988, however, with her children growing up, Witalis volunteered a second time and was re-commissioned in the Army Reserves, which allowed her a bit more work flexibility. "Papa swore me in both times," she said.

Witalis recalls a 2003 overseas deployment to Ecuador where the stated mission was "to win the hearts and minds of the Ecuadorean people." However, since it was a Medical Specialist Corps unit deployment, medical aid was given. Witalis reached the rank of Lt. Colonel. "I may be the only person with two honorable discharges," Witalis joked.

She continues to find ways to care for soldiers; she has volunteered twice at days-long resource fairs for homeless veterans. Ironically, not one of her family's next generation - three daughters and sons-in law, a niece and nephew - has served in the military.

"Roger and I are the end of it (family military service)," Witalis said. She finds it shocking that

"The soldier, above all other people, prays for peace, for he must suffer and bear the deepest wounds and scars of war." -Douglas MacArthur

In the weeks between Veteran's Day and the anniversary of Pearl Harbor a more noticeable veteran presence naturally shows itself front and center. Take, for example, army veteran and Lamorinda resident Patti Witalis. When she says her family first saw action in this country's army 155 years ago she isn't just whistling "Dixie." Her great grandfather, Patrick Henry, may himself have whistled "Dixie," however. He served as a soldier in the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia.

Patrick Henry was merely the first of four generations of soldiers Witalis can trace from the Civil War to the Gulf War.

"I didn't want to follow the standard route laid out for me when I graduated from college," Witalis explained. So after receiving her degree from San Jose State University in 1967 she was sworn in as an officer in the Army Medical Specialist Corps, training and working as an occupational therapist. The Vietnam conflict was heating up, "For What It's Worth" was playing on the radio, and Witalis' cousins, Emory and Jack, were drafted; her cousin

so few serve in the today's armed services, yet acknowledges that "times are different" and California is perhaps "a different part of the country."

"It's not that I like conflict," Witalis explains, "but we need to care for soldiers."

Even today, when she sees a soldier, she can't help but connect. "I introduce myself, give them a 'hooah' and tell them to keep safe."

Four generations in one family - all who have served in the U.S. Army. Hooah, indeed!



Witalis, right, assists a soldier with a new prosthesis.



Witalis' maternal grandfather, Silas, nicknamed "Chaps" in World War I



Witalis' mother, Lorraine, an Army nurse in World War II



Witalis' father, Charles, a naval aviator

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