

Walter Phelps- birthday Jan 16, 1947 in Wilburton    enlisted US Air Force

"I chose to enlist in the U.S. Air Force. I talked with different recruiters and was drawn to the Air Force. I joined (the military) because a man over the local draft board made a remark 'As soon as Walter graduates, I am going to grab him.' I thought, 'I will fool him and just join!'" said Walter Phelps. He served from July 5, 1966 to November 21, 1967.

Phelps said, "We were taken on a bus from McAlester to Oklahoma City, then flown to San Antonio." Phelps attended basic training at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio and then attended technical school as a jet engine mechanic at Shepard Field in Wichita Falls, Texas. "I was trained in jet mechanics, hydraulics, everything to do with aircraft," he said. "I had good instructors. If you did what you were supposed to, you made it well."

Upon completion of the training, Phelps reported to Davis-Monthan Air Force Base in Tucson, Arizona where he was assigned to Strategic Air Command. He then became Change of Duty to the support branch and was eventually given a medical discharge as Airman First Class in November 1967. He returned home to Wilburton, Oklahoma.

"I served during the Vietnam crisis but did not go overseas. I was hurt doing a training jump. When I landed, my knees buckled and I went down. I had torn the cartilages in both knees. Doctors removed the cartilage and said my knees would be good as new, but they continued to act up," he said. "I enjoyed the military lifestyle, and if I hadn't been injured, I would have stayed in."

Phelps said the hardest part of the lifestyle was, "Getting up and getting dressed right quick and getting out the door. We were sometimes surprised at what time to get up. One time they came in, got us up and outside in formation and it was just a drill."

He said, "The food was really good. It was better than what I was accustomed to! For breakfast, we had gravy and bread, eggs and sausage, milk and juice." He continued, "At Tucson, you could go back to the dining hall and have a midnight meal if you wanted. A lot of us took advantage of that."

"My favorite place to be stationed was Tucson. It wasn't too cold or too hot, it was pleasant to be there."

Phelps and a friend, Ivan Wilson, had joined the Air Force on "the buddy system", planning to spend their military service together. "We were promised the world by the recruiter, but we didn't get it. We were supposed to be stationed together, but that didn't happen. We went to basic training and then I went on to tech school. They split us up and my friend was in a different school," said Phelps.

He said service affected the way he relates to others. "It made me appreciate things. I was a country boy, not knowing much, and service helped me learn to be polite and treat people right. I learned to have good manners." He also learned practical skills, including financial astuteness. "I learned wise budgeting, how to keep track of money. I was poor before then, living on beans and 'taters!" He said beans, potatoes and cornbread is still his favorite meal, though!

Phelps also said his respect and love for the U.S. flag has grown. "I get emotional at seeing the flag."

A couple of years after his discharge from the Air Force, Phelps married Betty Kirk. He attended Eastern Oklahoma State College and Southeastern Oklahoma State University, graduating with an associate's degree in industrial art and a bachelor's degree in industrial maintenance. Phelps worked as an auto mechanics instructor for Kiamichi Vocational Technical School, retiring in 1992. He and Betty have a daughter, five grandchildren, and two great-grandchildren. They lost a son, Billy, at age 22 in a truck accident. When Billy was a teenager, they adopted a five-year-old nephew, Leon Fry.

Phelps is the oldest son of Thurman Leroy Phelps, Sr and Edith Mae Phelps. Walter said his dad made whiskey and cut logs (pulpwood) to bring in some money to the family. "I got to cut a lot of logs," he said, "but I never made whiskey." Chores at home included feeding the pigs, helping in the garden and getting wood for their stove. "Before I was in high school, my chores included getting in firewood for the next day. I came in one night and didn't carry the firewood in. I went to bed. The next morning, Dad came in and asked what I forgot to do. He said, 'Let's go get the wood.' He didn't let me get dressed – he had me bring in the wood barefoot and in my shorts. I never forgot to bring in the wood again."

There were enjoyable things to do as a youth, too. Hunting was a normal part of life, and Phelps still goes deer hunting and fishing.

"I remember a funny thing that happened one day when my dad and grandpa had found a bee tree and went to cut it down and rob the honey. Me and my dad and three uncles were there. Grandpa and dad cut the tree down and the next thing I saw were my uncles running and whipping the bees off. Grandpa had been smoking the tree, and just stayed with the tree and took the honey out."

Phelps said, "We would go to visit Dad's parents, who lived at Pine Creek, east of Hartshorne. Mom's parents lived in and around Wilburton, Panola and finally moved to Muldrow. He was a teacher and she was preacher at the Assembly of God. I still attend Pentecostal Holiness."

"For Christmas we all got together and had a big dinner. We didn't have much, just a roof over our head and a good meal. We did the same thing for Thanksgiving and Easter. We also had egg hunts at church for Easter," said Phelps. "We have continued the tradition of getting together for Christmas and Thanksgiving. I brought my kids up to hunt. My son and I hunted quite a bit until I lost him."

"Growing up, I didn't have much and since retirement and on through life, I have prospered. I feel good about my life and have been able to help several people," said Phelps. Examples of helping others included buying a home for a relative, as well as a vehicle, and taking care of other issues when needed. The last big thing he was able to help with was payoff of a home loan for another relative.

A message Phelps would like to leave for his children, grandchildren and future generations is, "Be kind, nice and do the best you can to help others. I like to see people do things I have done, like help others."

Phelps is involved in his community, and was a volunteer firefighter 31 years at Gaines Creek. He served as Fire Chief for 30 of those years. "Our first grant was \$5,000. We used that money, along with donations, and built a fire station. We had fundraisers to get the fire department going. We started out with forestry equipment and built our own fire truck," said Phelps. His experience and knowledge of mechanics was a great skill in this endeavor! "We continued to build equipment. We built a grass fire rig, and then decided to build another one. We found a

pumper truck from the Crowder Fire Department and I bought it outright, with the agreement if the fire department came up with enough money they would reimburse me.” Before Phelps left the fire department, a once-cent sales tax had passed, and they were able to buy a brand-new pumper truck.

“It is a lot of work to run a fire department. It is hard to be in the fire and smoke. Two fires I went on in the same area, I went down. They had to haul me out in an ambulance,” said Phelps. “I stayed with it a while after that, but got to a point I needed total knee replacements. I decided it was time to slow down.”

He said, “Now, the wife and I get out and travel around. We take our little companion - a Chiweenie named Minnie Pearl - with us. Minnie Pearl is the boss – she lets us know what she wants!”

Walter was chosen as the Choctaw Nation Veteran of the Month September 2022. He represents District 12, and attends the Crowder Choctaw Center activities, volunteering for many duties, including acting as President of the Senior Citizen group. Phelps delivers meals to the elderly and drives the shuttle for Senior Citizen trips.

“I feel blessed. I really appreciate Choctaw Nation and what they have done for me. I was chosen for Outstanding Elder two times. Last time I was the Overall Outstanding elder and went to Oklahoma City for AARP honors,” said Phelps, speaking of ways others had honored him.

“I remember an old song by Jim Reeves, ‘I’ve Lived A Lot In My Time.’ That is me,” said Phelps.