

Interviewed by Glenn Johnson

LT Commander Kenneth Vargus

Lt. Cmdr. Kenneth Vargus enlisted in the US Navy in 1985, serving until 2016. He had considered entering the Marines, but his father felt the specialties in the Navy would have better post-military options. He considered the Marines again when becoming officer, but decided he felt better suited for the Navy career.

After basic training in San Diego, Vargus served in Iraq, Falluja, and Spain. He was a Corpsman for the first ten years on the enlisted side, then switched to Civil Engineer Corps as an officer. Vargus said he had positive memories of Admiral Cellon (his boss when he was a new officer). "He listened and explained things well." Vargus also said he had fond memories of Captain Mohr, a surgeon serving in Vietnam. "He gave me work and life advice. I attended his wedding a few years later." They still stay in touch.

Vargus worked with a lot of civilians overseas, because the construction contracts were implemented by civilian agencies. He said he felt they understood the military and had the ability to build to military standards.

Asked if there was a point during his service that Vargus decided the military was (or was not) the right career choice, he responded, "After making O3, I had to do a lot of school including grad school, which made life very busy. I questioned if I had time for it." Vargus said it was a stressful time that made him feel it may be easier on the civilian side, but he stuck it out.

Vargus recommends military life for anyone interested in civil engineering. "Young officers are trusted with huge contracts and making decisions that would take years to get to on the civilian side. It is important to pick a specialty that you can use after you get out of the military." He said military service experiences still affect his life, and he uses the terms and lessons learned on a daily basis. "The biggest lesson was that you have to keep on 'keeping on', no matter what happens." Vargus admired a Chaplain who would put his life in danger in order to visit troops in a war zone. "Living your faith has to be done, no matter what is going on," he said.

Medals and citations include Global War on Terrorism (GWOT), Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). He qualified with the pistol and M16 rifle, and the 50 caliber. He could also drive several military vehicles and operate communications equipment.

Vargus completed "A" school for dental support; surgery rotation at San Francisco; Officer Candidate School at Pensacola; and Civil Engineering School at Port Hueneme, California.

He has vivid memories of serving in a combat zone in Fallujah. They had warnings for incoming mortar shells regularly and friends helped him through it. He represented his Battalion to the Marines in building things to improve their staging area. "We worked closely with all supported agencies with no turf battles or internal conflict," said Vargus.

He said wartime experience made him grow his faith. "I became a better officer and person." Vargus feels the two years in a war zone were the best part of his service experience because that is when he grew the most. For "good luck", Vargus took a pair of underwear from his Dad and would wear them when on a combat mission.

For off-duty recreation, Vargus enjoys outdoor activities, such as hunting and fishing. "Every duty station offered unique cultural opportunities," said Vargus, noting that he was glad he took the time to experience local things, like Karate in Okinawa, wine tastings in Napa and Spain, and the bullfights in Spain.

A portion of his service in the Navy was to speak at Native American history events. He enjoyed representing the Choctaw Nation and sharing history.

Vargus wants to share a message to help show understanding and admiration to Veterans. "When veterans come back, civilians don't know the hardships they have faced. A negative experience can impact their mental health. Suicide rates are high and we all need to show appreciation to veterans," he said.

Vargus was born in Lima, Peru to Ceasar and Linda Vargus. He has a sister who became an MD, and one brother who lives near him. He said special family traditions included going to the Labor Day Festival and Veterans ceremony at Tvshka Homma. His multi-cultural house enjoys a Peruvian dish for special breakfasts, and his wife has incorporated traditions from her Cuban heritage. "My wife, Diana Vargas, was ombudsman for all the Navy and Marine groups in Europe," said Vargus.

When schools closed for Covid-19, he was glad to be home to help with his children's schooling. He has twins, David and Lila Bell. When asked to describe himself, Vargus said, "I am extroverted and happy-go-lucky, but sometimes I overthink things. My Catholic faith is a very important part of me."

While in the Navy, Vargus was one of the highest-ranking Active Duty Native American Officers to date.