

Retired Lieutenant Colonel Al Alvarez spent his entire career in the Army, and has a life's worth of stories to tell.



War Stories

When one soldier landed at Normandy, he never imagined he'd be living to tell about it 66 years later. But the Airborne and Special Operations Museum in Fayetteville gives him the opportunity.

By Michael Graff

PHOTOGRAPHY BY GEOFF WOOD

He's going back there now, in his head, where he keeps 86 years of memories neatly arranged and ready to be retold before the day comes when he can't tell them anymore.

He's just off Omaha Beach. It's D-Day. He's 20 years old, a boy from Boston, bobbing in the water, waiting for someone to talk to him.

Private first class Al Alvarez thought he was ready for this, the Normandy Invasion. He'd spent six months training in England, practicing combat drills, jumping in and out of water, tinkering with his radio so he could perform his job as a communications specialist, sealing up a Jeep to make it waterproof for him and his lieutenants so they could drive onshore and take care of evil and save the world and go the heck home. He was ready. Everybody was ready. The fight was right, they all knew it, and they just wanted to get on with it. So earlier that day, when a line of Jeeps from the 1st Division's 16th Infantry Regiment drove onto a ship to leave for France, Al gladly brought up the rear, last Jeep in.

First Jeep out.

There's the beach. There's mortar fire. There's a radio. There's water. There's no bottom. He's 5-foot-6. The water must be 5-foot-7 deep. Just his luck. He should be in the Jeep. But he's not. It's gone, sunk. The lieutenants, too. First ones out, first ones dead.

He's a private first class, a rank where you don't breathe until someone tells you to. So he can do nothing but wait for a new boss, alone, his only company an equipment pack, a carbine rifle, two clips of ammunition, a quarter-mile of radio wire, and a 60-pound radio. With enemy fire all around, he needs someone to talk to, before something happens and he can't talk anymore.

He goes back there all the time, in his head, and he returns again safely. This is a place where things like that can happen. The Airborne and Special Operations Museum in Fayetteville traces the history of the Army's elite forces from World War II to today, recounting the lives of people like Alvarez — a volunteer, a tour guide, and a retired lieutenant colonel with 32 years of service in the United States Army.

Rembrandt isn't around to give tours of art museums. But as long as veterans like Alvarez are here, and their memories are clear, and they want to tell them, this museum

will remain one of the few places where visitors can see the exhibits through the eyes of the artists. In return, the artists can keep remembering, and keep talking.

From those waters, Alvarez received a new lieutenant, marched onto the beach, up the hill, into France, through Europe, into the Bulge, defeated evil, came home, met a girl from Boston, had four children, fought in Korea, fought in the Dominican Republic, survived a plane crash on the way to South America, controlled riots in Detroit and Baltimore, moved to Fayetteville, and finished his career with one final year of combat in a place called Vietnam. From those waters, he made it to all those places, and now here, to this museum. He just wants to talk about the ride.

"I'd still be in the waters of France had somebody not shown up," Alvarez says.

The 1st Division's 16th Infantry Regiment lost nearly 1,000 soldiers on that single day, June 6, 1944. Al Alvarez was not one of them.

The blue hats

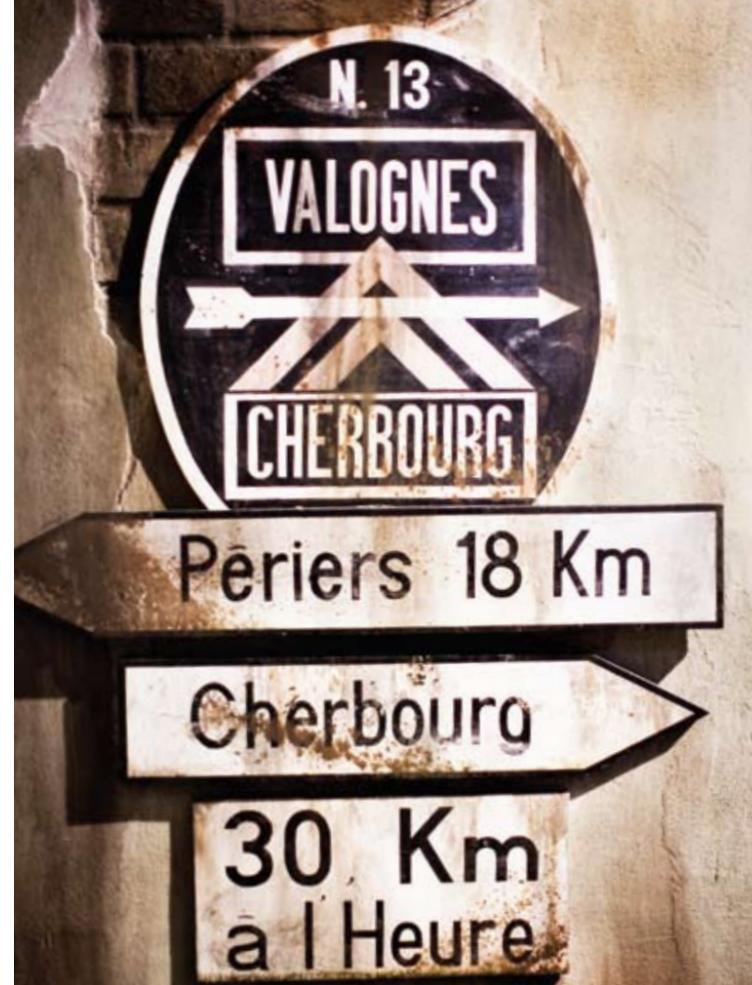
He's going back farther now, in his head, to when he was a kid, a real kid, about 6 years old, going to see the parade of military veterans in his hometown.

The Civil War guys pass through first. There aren't many of them. But they're wearing blue hats. The kid thinks they're old.

The Spanish-American War vets are second. There are more of them. Some are firefighters in town now, and the kid likes to hang around the fire station after school to hear their stories about fighting with Teddy Roosevelt at San Juan Hill.

Finally, here come the stars, the men from World War I. Everyone stops for them. That war, it's still close. The kid feels connected to these patriots. They're his heroes. They're not just people under blue hats.

Something happens when we lose living attachments to the past military. We engrave their names on stone walls and list their accomplishments on pages and leave them there. "Never to be forgotten," we say. We reenact their battles in open pastures, turning what was once a real war



When Al Alvarez gives tours of the Airborne and Special Operations Museum, he can speak with authority on most of the exhibits, because he was there. He carried a flag at D-Day (top right), was a 1st lieutenant in 1952 (bottom left), and later retired as a lieutenant colonel after serving in Vietnam.



The Airborne and Special Operations Museum in downtown Fayetteville opened in 2000 as a tribute to the Army's elite forces.

“This place, it kind of has a healing effect on you.”

into a show with an audience. But we lose touch. The longer we go without being able to talk to the guys with the blue hats, the more we make them into caricatures, and the more we forget them. Even if we say never.

“They were old people,” Alvarez says now of the Civil War veterans he saw in the parade as a kid. “That’s how I thought of them — as old. And they were as old as I am now.”

Alvarez is a well-maintained 86-year-old who swims daily and can probably still live through another landing on Omaha Beach if necessary. Today, though, he wears khakis and tennis shoes, along with a red collared shirt and a sweater, with a hat honoring the 187th Airborne Regimental Combat Team, nicknamed the Rakkasans, from his days in Korea. It’s a black hat.

Living exhibits

There are dozens of hats like that around the Special Operations Museum. On a Wednesday morning, the volunteers range from World War II to Vietnam to Desert Storm. Harold Latham, an 80-year-old retired first sergeant, lied about his age so he could join the military. He saw combat in Europe as a 15-year-old. After retiring from the Army in 1966, he stopped talking about the wars,

“Someone had shot at the American flag. It was a fantastic opportunity to do something bigger than drive a truck.”

and what he saw. Then the museum opened, in 2000, and Latham had a place to go, to be among friends. And then, he started talking more.

“We just put it in the bag and let it stay there,” Latham says of his memories. “This place, it kind of has a healing effect on you. ... It’s been a pretty great life.”

They say that a lot here — it’s been a great life. They smile and look back fondly. They all devoted careers to war, became defined by fighting, killed and watched others be killed, but they can let that go, when examining the whole of their lives.

Rain plinks off the aluminum roof of the museum’s five-story lobby. A mannequin soldier is suspended from a sprawling WWII-era round parachute, mimicking an old-time jumper. Alvarez points to the cords holding the mannequin to the chute: “Sometimes the guys would get their boot buckles tangled in those things. So they changed the uniform in 1941, put a pocket on the chest so the guys could jump with a knife, if they needed to cut a rope.”

The Special Operations Museum has about 100 volunteers who can offer such insight, if you just get them talking.

Signing up

He probably would’ve driven a truck if not for the military. That’s what all the young men in Boston seemed to do. But like so many people, Alvarez’s life pivoted the minute Pearl Harbor came under fire.

“Someone had shot at the American flag,” he says. “It was a fantastic opportunity to do something bigger than drive a truck.”

Alvarez went to the recruiting station, which had been set up in an automobile showroom. He stripped down, naked in front of someone other than family for the first time in his life. A doctor gave him a shot for tetanus and marked a T on his arm. More shots came. More markings. One doctor ran a metal rod down his chest. Someone asked him, “Do you like girls?” He was so overwhelmed, he didn’t answer. Someone handed him a cup for a urine sample. He was so nervous, he couldn’t go. He gave it

to his friend, Stanley, and said, “Fill this.” Stanley did. Finally, as he was about to enter the Army, ready to sign and go fight, he asked a recruiter if there was anything else they needed.

“Yes,” the recruiter said. “Check with your mother, because you’re not 18.”

Alvarez ran home. His mom wouldn’t sign the papers. She told him he could join after he was 18, if he still wanted. “But,” he protested, “the war will be over by then.”

A year later, he was in the Army. His career would take him on an incredible 14 combat tours. This past December, Alvarez got a Christmas card. It was a letter from Stanley, who signed, “Merry Christmas. Fill this.”

Spouse of a soldier

Alvarez came home from WWII and fiddled around his hometown. One night, he went to check out an Irish minstrel show. His parents came here from Spain, not Ireland. So he told the people at the door his name was Terrance Shannon to make him sound more Irish.

It was the best lie he ever told. That night, he met his future wife, Florence, who was in the show. You won’t find pictures of her in the museum. But maybe you should.

Military spouses are gaining recognition now. Television shows are plotted around them; family readiness groups are prominent organizations on all Army posts; “The CBS Evening News” devoted an entire segment to the subject this spring, highlighting Fayetteville and Fort Bragg.

Florence Alvarez never made the news.

She married Al in 1949. They had their first child, and then their second. Then the Army deployed Al to Korea. He asked her to move to Japan, so he could see her and the kids. She took the children and went. The final leg of their trip was on a boat filled with cattle. Florence, at 98 pounds, carried both children the whole way.

One day, after settling in, Florence went down to the store on the base. A soldier carrying mail stopped her and said, “I’m so sorry to hear about Al.” Florence was stunned.



Florence and Al Alvarez have been married for 60 years, through more than a dozen combat deployments for Al.

“Actually, I wouldn’t change a thing. It’s been a good life.”

The soldier carried on. “Oh, you didn’t hear? He went missing.”

For the next three days, Florence didn’t know whether Al was alive or dead. How’d she manage?

“There’s nothing you can do about it,” she says. “If you have the power, do something about it. If you don’t, just deal with it.”

That’s how military spouses cope, by controlling the controllable, and ignoring the rest.

Job for life

When Alvarez came home from WWII, he took a job within the Army accompanying dead soldiers to their families. It was an easy job, his superiors told him. He’d sit in the coach section of the trains, while the deceased traveled in the boxcar.

“No,” he told them. “If I’m responsible for this guy, I’m going in the boxcar.”

One of his first trips was to Tennessee. When he got there, the family of the soldier asked Alvarez what division he served in. “1st Division,” he said proudly. The slain soldier also was part of 1st Division. But one stood there, alive. The other was dead. One was from Boston. The other was from Tennessee. They had never met before the boxcar. They were two different people, with only two connections — they fought for the United States, and they were part of the same 20,000-member division of the Army. Still, the family invited Alvarez in for dinner. They wanted a soldier at the supper table, to replace the one they’d lost. Alvarez declined.

“I didn’t know the guy,” he says. “It was my job, and I thought it was an easy job; that’s why I took it. You do things in the service because it sounds

like a good deal.”

As much as Alvarez likes to talk, he’s not sappy. He looks back on his career as that of a workingman, not that of a military hero. A few years ago, he returned to London to speak at a D-Day remembrance event. It’s an easy job for him. He’s written dozens of stories for various publications, and dozens for his own pleasure. He took one of those stories to London and read it. The crowd wept.

“They were all crying. I didn’t cry,” he says. “I mean, I

acted like I cried, for them. But I didn’t cry.”

That’s how military folks cope, by doing their job, and ignoring the rest.

Living exhibit

Museum visitors do stop to listen to the old soldier in the black hat occasionally. They don’t interrupt, though. They want to move on, more quickly than Alvarez moves. But they catch pieces, snapshots of the artist.

Midway through the museum, Alvarez stops near the Korean conflict exhibit.

“And here’s where the Army got smart,” he says, pointing at a picture on the wall. “They made the most handsome guy in the Army a lieutenant.”

The picture shows Alvarez in 1950, standing at the front of a line of soldiers, feet together, at attention, chest out and proud. As the artist points to the picture today, his feet are together, he’s at attention, his chest is out and proud.

A muscular man with tight-cropped hair, probably in his late 20s, overhears Alvarez. The man’s face is shaved smooth, but it’s weathered. He’s military. That’s a safe bet here in Fayetteville, the town that feeds and is fed by Fort Bragg, the largest Army post in the country. The young soldier stops, squints at the picture, at the young Alvarez. The young soldier smiles, and moves on. The old soldier does, too.

Alvarez goes past the exhibit for the Dominican Republic conflict (he was there), through photos of riots in Detroit (there, too), and into Vietnam (and there). Here, a taller man approaches. Alvarez shakes his hand.

The man is James J. Lindsay. His picture is displayed in a case nearby, in the Vietnam section. The photo was taken when he was a captain in the Army. Lindsay later became the first commander of the U.S. Special Operations Command, and is now the president of the Airborne and



Special Operations Museum's foundation. He retired as a four-star general.

In this museum, the artists are all around you.

A military life

Outside the front door of the Alvarezes' tri-level house in the upper-end Stratford Hills neighborhood in Fayetteville, a plaque reads: "Home of the Alvarezes, 14 June 1949." It's the date of their marriage.

Al opens the door. Florence approaches him. "I tried calling you on your cell phone. Did you not feel it buzz?" Al stumbles through his answer. He tells her he's sorry he missed it. Busy with tours, and had lunch, at Subway, a six-inch club, no mustard.

Al walks downstairs and greets the dog, Elvis. It's actually his grandson's dog. The Alvarezes have lived in the same house since 1966. Florence oversaw the construction process. Al was in Vietnam that year. Florence took care of things. She raised the four children. One now lives in Charlotte, one is in Pennsylvania, and two are in Fayetteville. They have 10 grandkids, their pictures lining the den downstairs. They've never had a single child or grandchild in any real trouble, they proudly say. Florence

and Al, together, raised a strong family.

"He tells people all these stories," says Florence, who is 82. "But I don't care what Specialist Joe Blow did in Korea. I did my job. Al did his job. That's how it worked in the Army."

When they didn't have heat in Kansas and Al was gone, Florence chopped wood. When a flood tore through Japan, Florence made sure the children didn't see the dead bodies floating past. When rats and mice would sneak through the floor in their first apartment, Florence held a flashlight and a broom over the holes. When the family went down, together, in a plane crash in Surinam, Florence kicked two drunk guys out of a nearby hotel room so the kids could sleep. When the revolutions happened around them in Argentina, Florence kept the tubs filled with water.

"You know, the more I think about it, the divorce papers are coming," she says, laughing and putting her hand on top of Al's. "Actually," she says, quickly turning serious, "I wouldn't change a thing. It's been a good life."

At the far end of the downstairs den in the Alvarez house is a glass-covered frame hanging from the wall. Inside are 17 medals, 14 campaign stars, badges, pins, a knife, and two swords, all commemorating the military





career of a retired lieutenant colonel with 32 years of service in the United States Army.

Alvarez lists the medals and what they're for as if he's listing his lunch — Combat Infantry Badge, Legion of Merit, Bronze Star, Purple Heart, six-inch club, no mustard. It's time for his daily swim, to stay in shape for all the tours he's yet to give, all the stories he's yet to tell. He walks out, only briefly pointing to a framed United States flag above the photos of his grandkids.

The flag, its red faded to pink and blue faded to gray, has writing on it.

“PFC Alfred A. Alvarez 11055537. CBTY 7th FA BN, 16th INF REGTL Combat Team, 1st U.S. INF DIV. D-Day, 6th June 1944. ‘Easy Red’ Beach, Omaha, Normandy, France.”

The flag looks like it should be in a museum. But not yet.

“We had that at D-Day,” Al says. “We wanted to plant it at the top of the hill when we got there, but they told us we couldn’t. So I kept it.”

The 1st Division’s 16th Infantry Regiment lost nearly 1,000 soldiers on that single day, June 6, 1944.

Al Alvarez carried the flag from the water. 🇺🇸

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if you're going

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For a link to the museum website, go to ourstate.com, and click on “This Month’s Issue.”

