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A man on a mission: Veteran waves flag over I-81 to honor those who have served
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WOODSTOCK – Arthur “Art” LaFlam will wake up before dawn on Saturday – Veterans Day – and head out to the West Reservoir Road Bridge over Interstate 81 where he will set up everything he needs – banners, signs, and the all-important Stars and Stripes – to spend the day reminding travelers of those who sacrificed for their freedom.

LaFlam, 76, doesn’t remember how long he has been doing this, a problem he attributes to traumatic aneurysms in his head that have caused two strokes in the past. He does, however, remember the day he believes he got the aneurysms.

It was a quiet January evening in 1968 at an Army of the Republic of Vietnam camp overlooking Bien Hoa Air Base, where he was serving as a U.S. Army light weapons adviser on his third tour in-country. The New Hampshire native had enlisted for the war in Vietnam three years prior, following in the footsteps of an ancestor who served with Gen. George Washington in the Valley Forge campaign.

Suddenly, two South Vietnamese soldiers reported movement in the rice paddies outside the base. When LaFlam called in illumination rounds so that they could better see the field, the picture became more clear.

“It looked like black molasses just flowing to you very, very slowly,” LaFlam said. “We finally realized it was a human wave attack, and it was pointed right at our command bunker.”

Thousands of North Vietnamese soldiers and Viet Cong militants had moved into positions around Bien Hoa, part of a massive coordinated attack on American and South Vietnamese forces now known as the Tet Offensive.

After an intense firefight in the camp that left 60% of his men killed or wounded, then-Staff Sgt. LaFlam and six other men were ordered to a line of sandbag bunkers on the outer perimeter of the air base to fight off more waves of dedicated Communist fighters. When the North Vietnamese troops overran a nearby bunker, killing the two Army of the Republic of Vietnam soldiers manning it, they turned machine guns on him.

“There was just smoke, dirt flying... You couldn’t see your hand in front of your face, hardly,” LaFlam said.

Recognizing the voice of a helicopter pilot on his radio, LaFlam asked the pilot to launch rockets at the bunker that had recently changed hands. He threw a red smoke grenade out of his besieged position and, after a few passes, the pilot fired.

"I honestly thought that he had hit the wrong bunker, I really did. That's how much the ground shook, the debris flew and everything else," the veteran recalled. "I'm sitting there, you know... Seeing if you're still alive, what the situation is. So [the pilot] asked if the target was affirmative."

He looked out to see if the rockets had struck their target, and found a hole 15 feet deep where the nearby bunker used to be. LaFlam left the Army later that year with three Bronze Stars for his actions in Southeast Asia, and head trauma the Department of Veterans Affairs deemed "not service-related."

By the time the United States fully withdrew in 1975 from Vietnam, 58,220 Americans had lost their lives in the conflict. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., bears their names.

Almost half a century later, LaFlam stands on the West Reservoir Road Bridge on most every patriotic holiday to remind passers-by of those who served, those who died, and those continuing to serve in the Armed Forces today.

"I made a vow to every name on that wall to wave that flag with pride, for all the people on that wall," LaFlam said. "When I'm out there, it's not about me being out there. It's about the flag."

Many local volunteers, sometimes fellow members of Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 5040 and Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter 936, join him on the bridge. Even more people stop by briefly to show their appreciation, often leaving behind small trinkets or military coins. He keeps these in a small plastic bag.

His wife Joanne, whom he met between tours of duty, has often joined him as well. Their 55th wedding anniversary is coming up soon.

While being out in the elements for so long gets tiresome, he recalls one occasion when he was there on the anniversary of D-Day. A driver in a Cadillac stopped on the bridge and rolled down its passenger window.

"I looked in and I could see 'World War II' on his hat, and there were lots of tears streaming down his cheeks and he just stared... So, next thing I knew, I was in tears."

LaFlam's voice shakes with emotion when he recounts how the man finally raised his hand in a salute, and he returned it.

"The girl driving the vehicle leaned over and said, 'He's seen you out here many times and I wanted to say thank you, even though he can't get the words out.' So, how do you not go out on that bridge?"

LaFlam plans to be out on the bridge Saturday, and will continue going as long as he is able.