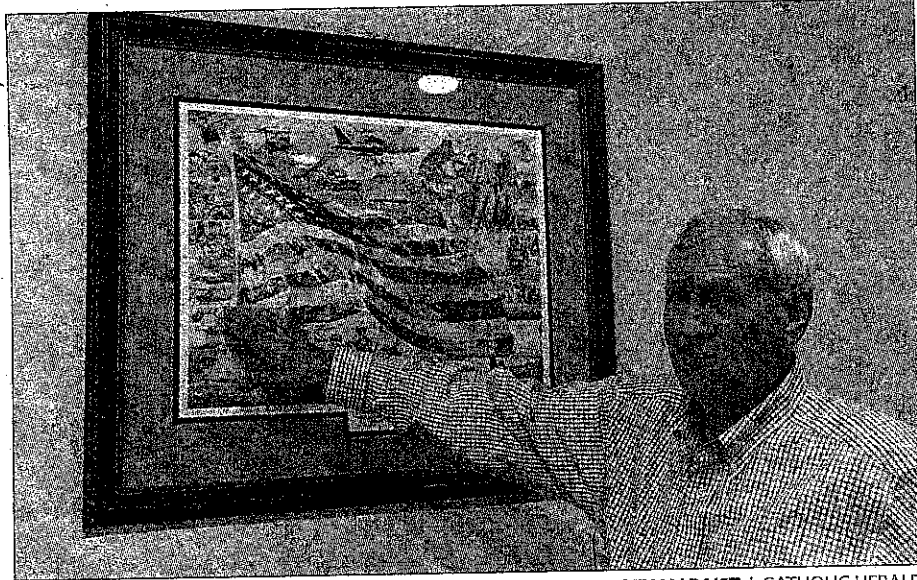


Destination battlefield



ZOEY MARAIST | CATHOLIC HERALD

John Powell, president of Military Historical Tours, points to the type of helicopter he flew while serving in the Vietnam War.

A Vietnam veteran leads military historical tours around the world.

By ZOEY MARAIST
Catholic Herald Staff Writer

In 2002, John Powell stopped by the Woodbridge offices of Military Historical Tours Inc. while meeting a friend for lunch. Today, he's president of the company founded by the father of that same friend. "They were having computer issues and I fixed their computers and just stayed," said Powell, a parishioner of St. Francis of Assisi Church in Triangle.

Around Memorial Day, the Vietnam War veteran will head overseas on his 32nd tour of Vietnam. "You get such satisfaction (from) taking care of people," said Powell. "The people you take on trips become your friends."

Military Historical Tours takes veterans and their families, students and historians to battlefields in Vietnam, South Korea, France, the Pacific Islands and elsewhere. A few tours are stateside, such as the "Birth of Democracy" tour that goes from Lexington and Concord down to the home of George Washington. "(I) took a group of high school kids last year (and) they ate every breadstick in Olive Garden. Then they ate every bit of mac and cheese at Mount Vernon. They were a lot of fun," said Powell.

Powell's life has prepared him well for his

current job. Powell, 76, grew up in Macon, Ga., and when he was 20, rather than get drafted, he joined the U.S. Army. "I got married that summer on the way to flight school, a brand new second lieutenant," he said. "We're having our 56th wedding anniversary next month." He and his wife, Angie, have a son and two grandsons.

Powell spent a year in Vietnam flying Bell AH-1 Cobra attack helicopters. For his service, he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross twice, the Bronze Star, three Meritorious Service Medals and the Legion of Merit, among other commendations. "Vietnam for me was a mixed bag," he said. "I lost a lot of good friends, but I made some really good friends that have lasted over the years."

After leaving the Army, he spent 10 years working in the marketing department at Hershey's Chocolate Company. When the company built a new plant outside of Charlottesville, he moved to Virginia. "Reese's Cups as they come off the line, the chocolate and the peanut butter is so intense, I can't describe it," he said. Powell then returned to active duty in the army and retired as a lieutenant colonel in 1995. He worked for

a veterans organization until coming to Military Historical Tours.

Many of the people who go on the tours are older veterans, said Powell. "I just took 10 to Iwo Jima, the youngest was 97, the oldest was 101. They're pistols at that age," said Powell. "That's the one drawback to this job is you get close to these guys over the years, and then they die, and it takes a piece of you."

Others who join the tours are family members of deceased veterans. One who became a close friend was the sister of a man Powell served with in Vietnam. "I was with her brother when he was shot down, and he later died," said Powell. "She started looking for people who knew her brother. I didn't really have the courage to call her so I wrote her a letter. It ended up in (the book) 'Chicken Soup for the Veteran's Soul.'"

Through his work, he's visited many beautiful Catholic churches, often-times as part of a tour and other times taking tourists to Sunday Mass. "In the Battle of Hue (Vietnam), there were 5,000 people in and around (Our Lady of Perpetual Help) church. They wanted to be protected and they knew the Catholics had an in with the big guy," said Powell. He has a soft spot for a church closer to

home. "St. Francis is the best church you'd ever want to go to," he said.

Going on tour often brings healing to the veterans and sometimes even a spiritual awakening, said Powell. "It's closure. We didn't start out to have people have an epiphany, but they do. I've seen veterans come back from Iwo Jima, and the family would tell me, 'He's never said a word about this but when we got there he just started opening up.' It happens," he said. "You see God's work in these people. A lot of them are not very religious people (but) some of them come home and become religious people after they have their epiphany, especially Vietnam veterans.

"We think we do a good service for everyone."

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BISHOP BURBIDGE Memorial Da

This Memorial Day family cookouts, ve other beginning-of-age all to take some meaning of this honor and mourn, gave their lives while throughout our mist for our freedom.

I ask the faithful of others of goodwill to weekend to recall th who have gone before nity service, a comm just a moment of ref cherish their memo memorials and mili and region where w our local fallen hero

We also remem those lost, who ma are empty seats w be sitting around ti The loss in these far on Memorial Day. died and pray they ing love.

Now and always, gift of these heroes reward those who c fort those who mo America.



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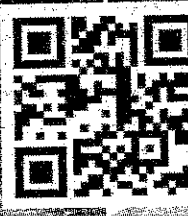
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