

# The Southside Times

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## FACES OF FREEDOM

Two Southside veterans recall serving in Operation Iraqi Freedom and how their experiences changed their lives

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# Faces of Freedom

*Two Southside veterans recall serving in Operation Iraqi Freedom and how their experiences changed their lives*

By Nancy Hammerstrom

The Southside Times interviewed Gregory Stevens and Gabriel Fleck, two U.S. Navy veterans who served in Operation Iraqi Freedom, for our annual "Faces of Freedom" issue. On Independence Day, please take a moment to remember those veterans who bravely fought for our country as well as those currently serving active duty.

## Gregory Stevens

**Where did you grow up and go to high school?**

I grew up in Whiteland and graduated from Whiteland High School in 2001.

**When did you enlist and how old were you?**

I enlisted in February of 2002. I was 18. I joined the United States Marines because I was pissed off about the 9/11 attacks. I felt like I was personally attacked and joined the infantry to take the fight to them.

**What do you remember about the day you enlisted?**

I remember thinking that I was going to get some payback for 9/11.

**Which war did you serve?**

I fought in Operation Iraqi Freedom 1-6.

**Where did you go for training?**

For boot camp I was sent to San Diego. I turned 19 in boot camp.

**What was Basic Training like, and was it anything like you expected or much different? How so?**

Basic Training was just an initiation, and I viewed the whole thing as a game. You have to play the game to survive, and the better you play it the easier life was in boot camp. A favorite movie of mine has always been *Full Metal Jacket* and that's what I was expecting for boot camp, and it did not disappoint.

**Where did you serve after boot camp?**

I went to more training at Camp Pendleton in California where I attended The School of Infantry. They teach you how to work on different weapon systems and teach different tactics on how to fight in combat.

**What were your jobs while serving?**

I was assigned as a 0311 which is a rifleman, then once I got to my unit, I was trained on the 81mm mortar systems as



Greg Stevens, center. (Submitted photo)

an 0341 (mortarman), then shortly after learning how the mortars worked, I was trained as a forward observer, the person who calls for artillery, mortar, and aircraft strikes. After our first deployment we cross-trained everyone on every weapon system that we had, so we made sure every Marine could do every job that we had and do it proficiently. We did this as we went outside of our forward operating base every day to conduct patrols and execute missions. In 2004 we took part in the Battle of Husaybah, in which we were attacked in the city early one morning and led to a 72-hour battle in the city of Husaybah. It was estimated that 600 insurgents were in the city. Of that estimated amount, 270 were reported killed in action and 40 captured. Our casualties were five marines and 36 wounded. While conducting patrols and missions, for the most part we just waited to be attacked and once that happened, we would I.D. the attackers and use whatever means necessary to eliminate the assault. After the incident was over, we would secure the area and conduct intelligence investigations to see if we could find out any more info about how the enemy is operating.

**How long did you serve?**

I served for one enlistment totaling four years.

**What are a few memories that stand out as you recall your service?**

I remember the tight bonds I made with the guys I served with; we legitimately formed a brotherhood by going through our version of hell. I still vividly remember.

**What did you do after ending your service?**

I took a break for a year before getting



Gabriel Fleck. (Submitted photo)

myself into law enforcement. I served two years on the Marion County Sheriff's Department before leaving there and joining up with IMPD. I medically retired from IMPD after being shot in a police-action shooting. In three different deployments being involved in direct combat engagements almost daily I was never wounded by the enemy while deployed in Iraq. Ironically, I had to return home to get shot and receive a Purple Heart from the city of Indianapolis. I then moved on to become the Marion County veteran service officer for the last six years, and my current role is a security coordinator at Lucas Oil Stadium.

**Did you marry/have children?**

I'm married with two children and two dogs!

**Did you continue any relationships you formed while in service?**

I am still in contact with about eight guys I served with on a regular basis. They are my closest friends, and we live hundreds of miles apart and see each other maybe once a year if we are lucky!

**How did your military experience change you/your outlook on life?**

I witnessed and took part in some pretty horrific actions while serving as an infantryman with the 3rd Battalion 7th Marines. Being a part of that changes you, experiencing that amount of trauma on a repeated basis does something to your soul. In my first year out of the military I was not mentally fit to hold down a job as I battled my demons. I turned to alcohol to drown the pain and contemplated taking my own life on a daily basis. My girlfriend at the time (now my wife) Andrea helped me through those dark periods in my life.

I got the help I needed mainly due to her pushing me to get help. It made me realize what was important in life. I did get a new-found appreciation for the beauty of this world.

**What life lessons did you learn based on your experiences in the war?**

Life is short; have fun, do what makes you happy, and cut out the drama ... in a nutshell.

**Are you a part of any veterans' organizations?**

I briefly joined the VFW after getting out and am a current member of The American Legion. I also volunteer as a board member for Whalen's Heroes where we raise money to purchase service dogs for veterans and first responders.

## Gabriel Fleck

**Where did you grow up and go to high school?**

I was born at St. Francis Hospital in Beech Grove to Larry and Andrea Fleck. I attended St. Roch Catholic School and then went to Cathedral High School. I graduated in 2003.

**When did you enlist, what branch did you choose and why?**

I enlisted in the U.S. Navy after I graduated from Purdue University. I initially opted for OCS (Officer Candidate School) but the wait to get in was much longer, so I enlisted as a Navy nuke (a nuclear reactor mechanic) and was going to apply for an officer position once I got through training. My grandfather was a World War II submarine veteran and he had always been my inspiration to join.

**What do you remember about the day you enlisted?**

I was proud, anxious, terrified, and hopeful all in one emotion.

**Which wars did you serve?**

Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation New Dawn.

**Where did you go for training?**

I went to Great Lakes, Ill. for basic training and promptly went to Charleston, S.C. for Nuclear Power "A" school, Power School, and Prototype. I spent two years in training.

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**What was Basic Training like, and was it anything like you expected or much different? How so?**

Basic Training was a unique experience because I enlisted as "The Old Guy." I was 24 when I went in and had my college degree. It was intimidating at first and scary to leave my wife. We had been married for two years when I joined. But it served its function of getting me in the right mindset.

**Where did you serve after Basic Training?**

After training, I went to the fleet, joining the USS Ronald Reagan (CVN 76). Funny story: I had graduated from training and was given orders to go to my ship, which was in Bahrain at the time they cut the orders. My wife, who was pregnant with our first, and I went from Charleston, S.C. to Florida for a wedding, up to Maryland to visit my brother, back to Indiana to drop off our dogs, out to Virginia to fly out and meet the ship. My wife went back to Indiana, and I flew from Virginia to Rota Spain, Sicily, and then to Bahrain. When I got off the plane, they were looking for sailors for the CVN 77, not 76, which had sailed away 30 days prior. So we got back on a plane, flew from Bahrain to Philadelphia, Philly to San Diego, San Diego to Pearl Harbor, PH to Guam, met the ship, sailed back to Hawaii, and then to San Diego, all within a month. I was in the Pacific mostly once I got settled and participated in Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation

New Dawn. After my accident, I served at the Intermediate Maintenance Facility in Bangor Base, Wash. helping with maintenance planning on the ballistic missile submarines.

**What was your job while serving?**

I was a nuclear mechanic, serving the power plant in the engineering space.

**How long did you serve?**

Five years, one month.

**What were some things that surprised you while you were serving?**

I was surprised at the enormity of the Nimitz-class carriers when I saw the ship in Guam. You have no idea how large these floating cities are until you come upon them for the first time. However, they become pretty small once you have been on them for a while.

**What are a few memories that stand out as you recall your service?**

Memories that will always stick with me are standing on the fantail of the carrier during night operations. Seeing the luminescent plankton glowing in the wake of the ship, looking up at the stars and seeing them clearer than ever before, watching F/A-18s land in total darkness, and knowing that at one point in the Pacific Ocean, we were closer to the people on the International Space Station than we were to land.

**What did you do after the war?**

I was medically retired after a near-fatal accident onboard the CVN 76 and continued with construction engineering and eventually sales in manufacturing for the defense sector. I moved back to Indiana to be closer to family and friends.

**Did you marry/have children?**

I was married to my beautiful wife, Erin who I met at Purdue when I went into the Navy and had one child and she was pregnant with a second when I got out. We now have four total children: Sam, 12; Sarah Jean, 9; Noah 6; and Natalie, 2.

**Did you continue any relationships you formed while in service?**

Yes! Two of my strongest bonds I formed in the Navy was when I was in training. Both guys were in my "A" School class at Nuclear Power Training. One is still in the service as an officer in the Nuclear Program in Virginia and the other is a reservist who lives in Florida. My chief who helped me when I suffered my injury is now a master chief and was able to give me and my family a tour of his carrier when we went to visit him this past fall in Norfolk, Va. It has helped me create some of the strongest bonds I will ever have.

**How did your military experience change you/your outlook on life?**

I live with injuries that I suffered while in that will forever shape my life and what I can do physically, but it also has given me a whole different perspective on life and to not take for granted the things I hold dear. It's given me drive, patience, and resolve.

**What life lessons did you learn based on your experiences in the war?**

Throughout my time I saw/experienced things that you would have never seen in the civilian world. I have been to places that I would love to go back and visit someday. And I have made friendships that will never die. It has ultimately taught me, however, that there is no substitute for the best thing God has given me, which is life. My own life, my wife, my children, and my family.

**Are you a part of any veterans' organizations?**

I am a board member for Warrior's Hope, which is a Christian-based peer support group out of Greenwood.

**Tell us about your future service dog.**

Because of my PTSD and anxiety that goes with this, I have been awarded, thanks to Whalen's Heroes, a service dog. I will receive her at the end of July and look forward to how she can help me manage my stress and anxiety due to my chronic pain.



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