Air Force vet David Tubergen lives a life of service in Burke

By TAD ELLIOTT
For The Paper



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Thanks to the N.C. School for the Deaf, Dave Tubergen landed in Morganton where he is known for his quiet spirit of selfless volunteerism.

At the age of 13, Tubergen moved from the family home in Elmhurst, Illinois to Morganton when his father took a job teaching physics at NCSD. While he was a student at Morganton High School, Tubergen "got in a lot of trouble" which resulted in his driver's license being revoked for two years. He quit going to school and obtained a GED from WPCC right on schedule with his former classmates in 1970.

By this time, Tubergen's older brother John had spent four years in the Air Force and suggested that enlisting would be a good way to "get out of trouble." After basic training at Lackland Air Force base in Texas, Tubergen was assigned to direct duty (without further training) at McClellan Air Force base in California and became a squadron dispatcher for EC-121 surveillance aircraft that were in use during the Cold War and also in Vietnam. While there, he was selected as the Airman of the Month for his squadron and the 552nd Air Wing.



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In 2023, David Tubergen (left) received the Medallion Award for Volunteer Service from then-Gov. Roy Cooper.

During his time in California, Tubergen met Denita "Dani" Smith while visiting an Air Force buddy. They discovered that they had the same birthday, Aug. 29, and got married in 1974 even though she was still in high school.

Tubergen was transferred to Duluth, Minnesota where she completed the GED. They celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary on Feb. 8, 2024.

The base in Duluth was part of the NORAD early defense warning system extending from the U.S. and Canadian border to the North Pole. While at the 23rd Air Division, Tubergen was named the Junior Enlisted Advisor to the commander of the 23rd NORAD Region.

From there, Tubergen went to Spangdahlem, Germany which operated F-4 fighter jets as part of NATO. Next, he was assigned to the Joint Operations Centre which was the NATO underground strategic headquarters, "the Cave" as it was then known, in Maastricht, the Netherlands.

Tubergen retired as a master sergeant. His career was steeped in senior-level positions for early warning and control, reconnaissance, defense, and spy-type missions, including his last assignment at the Defense Intelligence Agency in Washington, D.C.

As NCOIC (Non-Commissioned Officer in Charge) of Air Operations, he worked with many other government agencies including Congress, the State Department, the CIA, the United Nations, as well as the Space Shuttle Support Team.

After 20 years of service in far-flung duty stations, Tubergen retired from the Air Force in 1991 and returned to Morganton to care for his mother, Marie Butkus, who retired from NCSD as an art instructor.

In 2023, then-Gov. Roy Cooper presented Tubergen with the Medallion Award for Volunteer Service, the state's highest award, for his "will do" devotion to helping others in and around Burke County via the American Red Cross, AMOREM Hospice in Valdese, and DAV chapter 43 (Disabled American Veterans) in Morganton.

In 2008 and 2018, Tubergen received the Volunteer of the Year award from the VA Medical Center hospital in Asheville for transporting disabled veterans to Asheville and Hickory for medical appointments and for coordinating multiple trips per week with himself and other drivers as part of the DAV Volunteer Transportation Network.

Recently, Tubergen was presented with a 10-year service pin from AMOREM Hospice (formerly Burke Hospice) for his dedication to veterans and their families in a special program called Veterans Honoring Veterans.

Tubergen is also a first-responder in the local American Red Cross Disaster Action Team, on call around the clock to provide support and financial vouchers to local families in the event of a house fire or other disaster. He is a speaker and instructor for the Red Cross and has been a volunteer for 30 years.

An unheralded but significant part of Tubergen's volunteer service is assisting veterans with the VA disability claims process. He can be found at the DAV chapter on Saturday mornings from 9-11 a.m. every weekend. The DAV provides assistance to all veterans free of charge and is at 2779 DAV Ave., Morganton, just a short drive south of town on Hwy. 18.

Tubergen has been a member of DAV for 24 years and has held various positions including past commander and past adjutant/treasurer. He is currently a senior chapter service officer and the junior vice commander. He can be reached at tubergen@bellsouth.net.

"You've got to keep busy helping others," Tubergen likes to say. "You'll live longer!"

Tad Elliott is a Navy veteran and hospice volunteer who contributes to The Paper.