

Tahoe residents serve their country with pride

By Kathryn Reed

STATELINE – Ask someone what Armed Forces Day is and they'll probably respond with a puzzled look.

It was created in August 1949 to have one day dedicated to the men (mostly at that time) and women serving in every branch of the U.S. military. At the same time, it was also instituted to replace the separate days of recognition the various branches had in place. And while the Marines take part in Armed Forces Day, they have also retained a day unto themselves.

Memorial Day is to honor those who have died serving their country, while Veterans Day recognizes all former members of the military.



Armed Forces Day is always the third Saturday in May – which is May 18 this year.

A few women from the Lake Tahoe area who have served in the military spoke at the May 15 Soroptimist International South Lake Tahoe meeting at Harrah's Lake Tahoe.

Throughout the Lake Tahoe Basin there are about 4,000 veterans.

Carol Olivas, who is the secretary for the American Legion Auxiliary in South Lake Tahoe, described a veteran as someone who wrote a blank check to the military that could be paid with their life.

One of the things Auxiliary members do is spend time with the vets who are living at the Barton Skilled Nursing Facility. Two are there now, while last year nine called the South Tahoe center home.

Olivas said four vets who have served in Afghanistan are now attending Lake Tahoe Community College.

“All come back with post-traumatic stress,” Olivas said. “You don’t go to war and come back the same.”

Pat Bailey, who lives in Gardnerville and served in the Army as a dental specialist from 1975-78, told the group, “When people thank me for my service, I thank them for my college education.”

The GI Bill, which pays for college tuition, has long been one of the benefits of serving in the military.

All of the women who spoke Wednesday had positive things to say about their time in uniform. None got into the nitty-gritty of what life was really like, though.

Communication is one of the big things that has changed. There was a time when letters would be months apart between the service member and their loved ones who were in the States. Now computers allow for instantaneous emails and at times Skyping is available. And while this isn’t possible for all of the men and women serving overseas, it is a modern convenience even in times of war.

Francine Turner was in the Air Force during the Vietnam era. She was one of the first women to go through the jet mechanics course.

Locally, though, what she is known for is playing “Taps” on her bugle. She says it’s an honor. It’s also something Turner has done since was she a teen on a base in Texas.

Veronica Hawkins moved to Tahoe in 1978 with her parents. She

graduated high school from the Carson Valley in 1995. From there she went right into the Air Force. She got out in 2000.

Hawkins served in Operation Desert Storm and was in the Bosnia conflict. One of her jobs was to tell people about their next deployment; which she said did not make her popular.

Patience Wenck, who is now a nurse practitioner with Barton Health, joined the Army Reserves in 1983. Her one weekend a month and two-week summer commitment grew as her rank and time served increased.

She was on active duty from 1987-90 before joining the Reserves again. From January 2005 to March 2006 she was in Germany helping wounded soldiers.

And while she met her husband, Fritz, through the military, he spent less time on a ship as a member of the Navy than she did going from island to island in Fiji administering medical care.

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Notes:

- The annual Memorial Day service is at Happy Homestead Cemetery in South Lake Tahoe on May 27 at 11am.