

KINGMAN - A single act of kindness forever changed Paul Pitts' life in 1971.



He has paid it forward ever since.

Pitts was an airman serving at U-Tapao Air Base in Thailand during the Vietnam War. About 80 percent of the Air Force's bombing strikes over North Vietnam originated from Thailand and the action when Pitts was there was nonstop.

Pitts and his fellow airmen had worked every day for a year and exhaustion was taking a toll. Then, the North Vietnamese sent a special forces squad that penetrated the airfield and used satchel charges to damage the B-52s and other aircraft in an effort to disrupt the intense bombing campaign.

"Nobody on our side was injured and they [the enemy] were all killed, but that was a wakeup call," he said.

An Air Force chaplain requested time off for Pitts and a few of his friends and took them on a weeklong tour of Thailand.

"He changed my life," said Pitts. "I thought, 'this is something I want to do with my life.'"

After Pitts left the Air Force in 1972, he joined the fire service in Southern California in 1974, after training in a firefighter-paramedic program. He spent the next two decades in the fire service, retiring as chief of a small department in southern Oregon in 1995.

When not fighting fires, Pitts said he took advantage of his G.I. Bill benefits and trained to be a chaplain. "I was ordained in 1986," he said, "but I had no calling to lead a church. I wanted to be hands on. The years went by and I completed my advanced training by the time I retired from the fire service."

In 2005, he was invited to join the Air Force's Volunteer Auxiliary Chaplaincy Corps. He officiates or assists in funerals for members of all branches of the military. In 2010, he became one of the chaplains for the Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter 975, which serves the Kingman area, and he also became chaplain and a board member of Kingman's Jerry Ambrose Veterans Council.

He had found his calling.

"It seems all veterans have PTSD [post traumatic stress disorder]," he said during a recent interview. "And a lot of veterans need a mentor or a friend and I try to fill that role."

Nominated by Jerry Ambrose Veterans Council President Pat Farrell as a Hidden Hero, Pitts doesn't consider himself a hero, hidden or otherwise, but he is one to countless veterans.

In addition to participating in military funerals here in Kingman, in the Northwest, Midwest and all the way to Arlington, Va., Pitts visits veterans in hospitals, complete strangers who don't know him, but are grateful for his compassion. And while he devotes his time to both the living and the dead, more and more of his time has become focused on the latter.

"The biggest thing I do, given the age group of a lot of veterans, is help to coordinate funerals and memorial services. Sometimes I officiate, sometimes I assist."

Pitts noted it's common knowledge that most World War II and Korea veterans have died, and age has begun to catch up to Vietnam veterans. He notes that he joined the service in 1969 at 21. He celebrated his 67th birthday in August.

In addition to tending to the spiritual needs of veterans, Pitts helps their families navigate their way through the Veterans Administration in tandem with the funeral home.

Reaching out

Keeping track of older veterans is easier than the younger ones, he said, and that is a concern to Pitts and the veterans' council.

"We don't deal with a great amount of younger veterans," he said. "Pat and I have tried to reach out." The difficulty has to do with how modern veterans maintain friendships.

Veterans from World War II through Vietnam had officers' and non-commissioned officers' clubs where former and active duty troops gathered to socialize. It was from those clubs that the VFW, American Legion and other civilian organizations came, he said, where veterans could share their common experience.

"All these newer veterans, in talking with them, they don't do that. They network through Twitter and Facebook," he said. "They are used to being able to sit in front of a computer and connect on Skype, so they don't have to go to the VFW or American Legion and they prefer it that way."

Pitts said the council and Vietnam Veterans of America have tried to honor veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan, but they simply are not interested.

"They proudly enlisted or trained to be officers and they proudly served the nation, but once they get out it appears they don't want a lot of recognition. Us older vets want to make sure they know they are appreciated, but we don't know where they are unless they were grievously injured and their story hits the paper."

Traveling man (and woman)

Not all of Pitts' work involves veterans. His wife Karyl is a traveling nurse and he has gone with her all over the United States and overseas, where she is part of a team that provides large groups of people free health care and he tends to their spiritual needs.

Pitts did come into contact with a Vietnam veteran who was distraught over the recent loss of his wife while on one of those trips.

"He was getting discouraged with life," said Pitts. "I met with him frequently and got him the services he needed. He's no longer depressed and is living a fully thriving life."

He said veterans are no different than anyone else. "We have to let them know someone cares. When you do that, when you know this is a case of knowing you have a chance to change someone's life, that's what you do.

"Veterans need to have a purpose in life, we all do, I try to build them up so they can fulfill that obligation."