

Lewisport Air Force Veteran Reflects on Service and Sacrifice

By Jennifer Wimmer

While the United States faced one of the most tense chapters of the Cold War, a young mechanic from Lewisport worked tirelessly to keep the Air Force's mighty B-52 bombers ready for flight.

William "Billy" Louis Dowell, now 83, served in the U.S. Air Force from 1960 to 1964, spending much of his time stationed at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, Florida, and later at Warner Robins Air Force Base in Georgia. He grew up in Lewisport and graduated from Lewisport School in 1960—one week before shipping out for basic training.

"A recruiter sent me and another guy to Evansville," Dowell recalled. "They had 100 people to go to Indianapolis, so that's where I enlisted. I enjoyed my service. I serviced the plane and worked on the plane. I enjoyed doing that and learned a lot."

He chose the Air Force after learning that he could take an aptitude test and be selected for a career field that suited him.

"The Air Force recruiter said you could take a test and pick your field," he said. "It was four years instead of three; the Navy was three. You take a test and you have to qualify for it. It has to do with how you score on the test. They can put you wherever they want to but wherever they figure you would do best."

Dowell began his service with basic training in Texas, followed by six months in Illinois, where he attended technical school.

"I graduated one week, and the next week I was in the service," he said. "My basic training was cut short. I was only in Texas for six weeks. I went from there to Illinois for six months. It was almost like going to school. We would have school half a day, and then we worked on the planes. They had a model there, and we'd go out and learn the different parts of the plane."

After Illinois, he was assigned to MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa from 1961 to late 1962, serving as an aircraft mechanic. It was during that time that the Cuban Missile Crisis erupted—a 13-day confrontation in October 1962 that pushed the United States and Soviet Union to the brink of nuclear war.

"I was not close to combat," Dowell said. "In Florida, we went through the Cuban Missile Crisis. I was always on the base."

As tensions eased, Dowell was transferred to Warner Robins Air Force Base in Georgia, where he continued working on B-52 Stratofortresses—long-range bombers that formed a critical part of America's nuclear deterrent.

His days were long and his hours unpredictable, but the work shaped his lifelong habits. "We were taught that when you repair things, you don't just put a bandage on it," he said. "You make sure it's



U.S. Air Force veteran William "Billy" Louis Dowell of Lewisport served as an aircraft mechanic on B-52 bombers during the tense years of the Cold War, including the Cuban Missile Crisis, before retiring in 1964 and returning home to Hancock County. His dedication to precision and integrity in service is a lasting legacy this Veterans Day.

right. I serviced the fuel and liquid oxygen and worked on engines there."

He often worked rotating shifts, sometimes starting in the very early morning or late at night.

"I worked odd hours and I stayed away from the crowd a bunch by working different shifts," he said. "Sometimes I had to go to work at 3 a.m. The next day, I would go to work at 9 p.m. That's how I worked for about a year—different odd hours. We had a night barracks, and I managed to get a room to myself, so I didn't have any trouble sleeping."

Despite the isolation of nighttime duty, Dowell said he worked well with his fellow soldiers.

"I wasn't with the same guys all the time. I was working with different guys, off and on," he said. "At one base, I worked nights a lot, and you didn't see anybody. I was on nighttime duty. I got along good with all the people I was around."

Although he never deployed overseas, he said he wanted to.

"I never did get to make it. I couldn't on account of B-52s," he explained. "They only had two bases—Guam and one in the middle of the Indian Ocean. I would have had to reenlist for six years, and I didn't want to."

He retired from the Air Force in June 1964 and returned home to Lewisport. He brought with him a strong sense of precision and integrity in completing jobs thoroughly, with close attention to detail. His dedication to doing every job right—whether on a B-52 or in a factory—has been a guiding principle throughout his life.

"I learned a lot from my military service about doing things right," he said. "You do it right; you don't do it halfway when you repair something. That has stayed with me all of my life. You do it right and properly. Their lives depend on how properly you service the plane for them to fly it. When you work on something, you fix it. You repair it or replace it. You do it right and you fix it. You don't just do something and forget about it; you make sure it's right."

After leaving the military, he tried several jobs before joining National Southwire Aluminum (NSA). He worked there for 30 years as a maintenance mechanic.

"I helped build NSA," he said. "I helped put it up from the ground up, and worked in it afterward."

Dowell credits his father, William Knox Dowell, with teaching him the mechanical skills that would carry him into both his military and civilian careers. His father, a World War II veteran, served as a sergeant in the U.S. Army in Southeast Asia, traveling through Burma—now Myanmar—into China and Calcutta, India.

"He wasn't in any major combat. He was 36 when he was drafted," Dowell said. "He went in

as a truck driver and a mechanic. He saw a lot of bad stuff and he never would talk about it. My dad taught me mechanic skills. He taught me how to work on things, and I was learning from him. I worked on farms growing up. We didn't live on a farm, but I worked for farmers, in tobacco and hay."

Reflecting on the changes between his generation and today's, he said military service looks different now.

"It's a lot better than it was when I was in there, I imagine," he said. "It depends on what branch you want to join. It's all volunteer now—no draft anymore. The Air Force was voluntary when I went in. All through high school, I talked about going into the Navy. Then the Air Force recruiter told me to take a test to pick my field, and that's when I changed my mind and went into the Air Force. I almost turned around and joined the Navy after serving in the Air Force, but I didn't. It was a long time before I got married after I retired."

He and his wife, Judy, live in Lewisport. The couple is blessed with two children, Amanda Emmick and Duane Rickard Dowell. Judy is a member of the Ladies Auxiliary for Hancock County VFW Post 5186. Her family's history is rooted in military service as well.

Her father, Sgt. Arthur "Art" Blain Prewitt, served in the U.S. Army during World War II. He was captured in North Africa and spent 18 months as a prisoner of war. Judy's younger brother, Col. Curtis Prewitt, was a chaplain who served during the Vietnam era. This year, he will serve as guest speaker for the Hancock County Veterans Day program in Hawesville. During the ceremony, Judy will toll the remembrance bell to honor her father and all prisoners of war and those missing in action.

When asked how civilians can better support veterans, Dowell's answer carried both conviction and compassion.

"Respect them more, instead of doing what they did when the guys came back from Vietnam," he said. "When those guys came back, they spit on them and threw stuff on them, and this and that. They should be respected and appreciated. Nowadays, when I wear an Air Force cap and someone says, 'Thank you for your service,' I always say, 'Well, I wish they had done that years ago for the guys that went to Vietnam.' That was awful. They ought to have arrested every one of those people that did what they did to those troops. It's a good thing we have a great military or we'd be in communism. We wouldn't have a country anymore without our military."

Dowell said he has lost touch with the friends he made during his service.

"I lost contact with my comrades a long time ago. I wish I could get in contact with them. I don't know whether or not they'd still be living or not," he said.

From keeping the B-52 engines running smoothly and supporting the mission of guarding the skies during perilous moments in American history, to helping build industry back home, Dowell's quiet diligence reflects the strength passed down through generations of veterans.

His service stands as a reminder, this Veterans Day, that every contribution—whether on the front lines or the flight line—keeps the nation strong.

A Tribute to Our Fallen Heroes

This poem, first published in 1850 in the *Frankfort Yeoman* newspaper, reflects on the courage and sacrifice of America's service members. Written by Theodore O'Hara to honor Kentucky soldiers who fell during the Mexican-American War, its enduring words remind us of the cost of freedom and the valor of all who have worn the nation's uniform—those who served and those who still stand watch today.

Bivouac of the Dead

By Theodore O'Hara

Alone awakes each sullen height
That frowned o'er that dread fray.
Sons of the Dark and Bloody Ground,
Ye must not slumber there,
Where stranger steps and tongues resound
Along the heedless air.
Your own proud land's heroic soil
Shall be your fitter grave;
She claims from war his richest spoil—
The ashes of her brave.
Thus 'neath their parent turf they rest,
Far from the gory field,
Borne to a Spartan mother's breast
On many a bloody shield.
The sunshine of their native sky
Smiles sadly on them here,
And kindred eyes and hearts watch by
The heroes' sepulcher.
Rest on, embalmed and sainted dead,
Dear as the blood ye gave;
No impious footstep shall here tread
The herbage of your grave.
Nor shall your glory be forgot
While fame her record keeps,
Or honor points the hallowed spot
Where valor proudly sleeps.



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