

Real Top Gun

Richard Michaud served in three wars

BY JIMMY MAGAHERN

Barbara Laken fluffs the cushions of the couch directly beneath the display of medals and the *Top Gun* sign as her 90-year-old dad, Richard Michaud, slowly takes his favorite seat in the living room of his Mesa home. Michaud cracks a wry smile as the reporter across from him makes eye contact, knowing that from this angle, the large red, white and blue wings of the iconic 1986 movie logo jut out from his ears in an almost cartoonish fashion.

The placement of the sign is no doubt a loving decorative touch from his proud daughter, who calls her dad "a real Top Gun." The veteran Navy flyer himself, who actually trained for aerial combat maneuvering in the early 1950s, about a decade and a half before the establishment of the U.S. Navy Fighter Weapons School in Miramar, California that would come to be nicknamed Top Gun school, confesses he's not a great fan of the movie, even as Hollywood gears

up for a long-awaited sequel.

"One of the things that frustrated me about the *Top Gun* movie was when Tom Cruise's character felt he'd killed his buddy and right in the middle of a big battle, he's pulling out the buddy's dog tags to look at them," he says. "You wouldn't have time for that!"

The line invites a chuckle, but Michaud's no longer smiling. "You know, throwing him off the back end of," he pauses for a long time, then sadly exhales, "a carrier is probably something you'd do."

Michaud holds the rare distinction of having served in three wars: World War II, the Korean War and Vietnam, giving him membership in an informal club whose badge he proudly wears on a hat reading, "All 3 Wars Veterans of America." But until about three years ago, Michaud's deep well of military experience was a secret he kept from his four grown children, three of whom still live close by – Laken just across the street and one of her three brothers in the house next door.

"My dad is a hero. And we never knew it," says Laken, who's also encouraged her dad to write a book. "My mom never talked about it, and it wasn't until she passed three years ago that we started getting into the books and the stories. He had five distinguished flying crosses. And we had no idea."

"I think it's probably typical of most veterans," Michaud says dismissively of his long-standing reluctance to share his military history with his offspring. "They don't come home and run through all of their experiences for the family."

But Laken, a genealogy enthusiast who, with help from family – and websites like Ancestry.com – has created an ambitious library of family history in Michaud's den, dug into her dad's record and discovered that during

With family encouragement, Richard Michaud is finally speaking about his military career.



Michaud during his active duty days. (Photos by Tim Sealy)

his stint in Vietnam, he was part of a rescue team that saved many soldiers.

"We were assigned responsibility for search and rescue," Michaud explains. "We had a lot of different kinds of airplanes and when one of them would go down, it was our job to go to the scene and neutralize the enemy and then we'd bring in a helicopter and there was a cable we'd drop down and pick our guys up. During the 16 months I was over there, we had 78 guys down and we got 76 of them out. It was a very satisfying mission to be involved in. And I never took a bullet myself, which I figured was pretty good for 180 missions."

Michaud admits he was disappointed when he came home from Vietnam and was greeted with less than a hero's welcome, but he understands why.

"Unfortunately it was the war that had the attitude against it," he says, referring to the widespread social movement among young Americans at the time who opposed U.S. involvement in Vietnam. "With World War II, you didn't have that problem – or even in Korea, to speak of. But with Vietnam, you had all the marching and the going to Canada to avoid the draft. It was not a very popular war."

Truth be told, Vietnam was not

Michaud's first choice of a conflict to be involved in, either. He'd originally joined the Navy straight out of graduating high school in Logan, Utah in 1945, to serve in World War II, but he had barely completed training when the war ended with Japan's surrender. The Navy kept him in Southeast Asia anyway, serving at bases in the Philippines and the Admiralty Islands for 14 months until he had accrued enough points to come home. At that time he started college on the G.I. Bill, married his wife, Patty, and worked for a while as a reporter for the local newspaper.

When the Korean

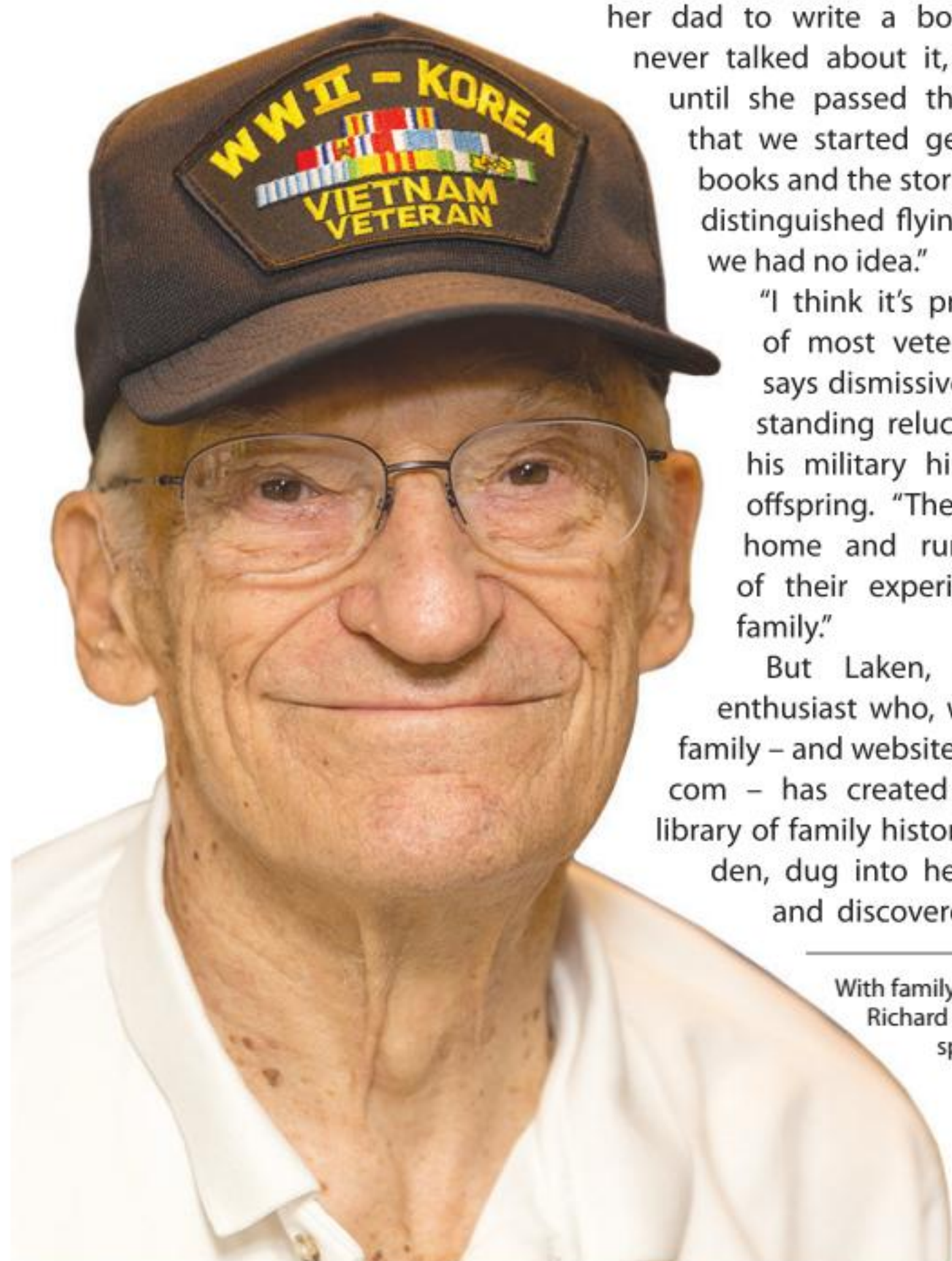
War started, he was commissioned again, and that's when Michaud took part in the pilot's training. Once again, however, Michaud wound up late to the battle.

"Unfortunately – or maybe fortunately – the war ended the same time that I finished that training," he says. "So I never did make it physically to Korea."

He moved to Arizona and was assigned to the ROTC program at Arizona State. In the summer of '69, just as President Nixon was beginning troop withdrawals, Michaud got called to duty again. This time, however, he saw plenty of combat. "Many of his friends never came back," Laken says.



Richard Michaud has five distinguished flying crosses.



When Michaud did come home, he'd had his fill of military life and opted for a much quieter lifestyle, taking a job at ASU as an assistant director of financial aid and later moving back to Logan to perform the same job for Utah State University. While there, he discovered a new, unlikely passion to take the place of flying: Dutch oven cooking. He founded the International Dutch Oven Society in Salt Lake City, a group of "black pot enthusiasts" that now has close to 50 chapters around the globe.

Between cooking cobblers in his own extensive collection of the heavy iron pots, Michaud says he's been watching the 10-part Ken Burns PBS series *The Vietnam War*, and says that for the most part, he agrees with Burns' gritty ground-up view of the dark chapter in American history. "It was a down and dirty war," he says. "But I'm watching to see if they ever get around to covering anything from our mission. We were fortunate in that we were in a life-saving side of the war."

With nearly 20 grandchildren and over 60 great-grandchildren in his fold, Michaud counts his strongly held LDS faith as a key to living a long, healthy life.

But he also sees his military service as part of that.

"I think the key to having a life well lived is to help people," he says. "And I see my military experience as something along that line. It doesn't always work out totally like you'd like it to, but there's nobody else in the world fighting for the freedom of people as much as the United States."

He notes an awareness of the NFL protests that have sparked national debates on patriotism, and says he understands the point many of the African-American athletes are trying to make by taking the knee instead of standing for the flag during the national anthem.

"I appreciate that there are those here who feel they don't have those freedoms," he says, although he allows it "makes [his] heart sick" to see the flag becoming a target in the debate. "That's what all people want, to have the freedom to live their lives as they choose and raise their families. But I still feel you have a better chance to do that in America than any other place in the world. And I think that the people who appreciate America and the freedoms that they have here need to stand strong," he adds. "Because I think it's going to get tougher." ■

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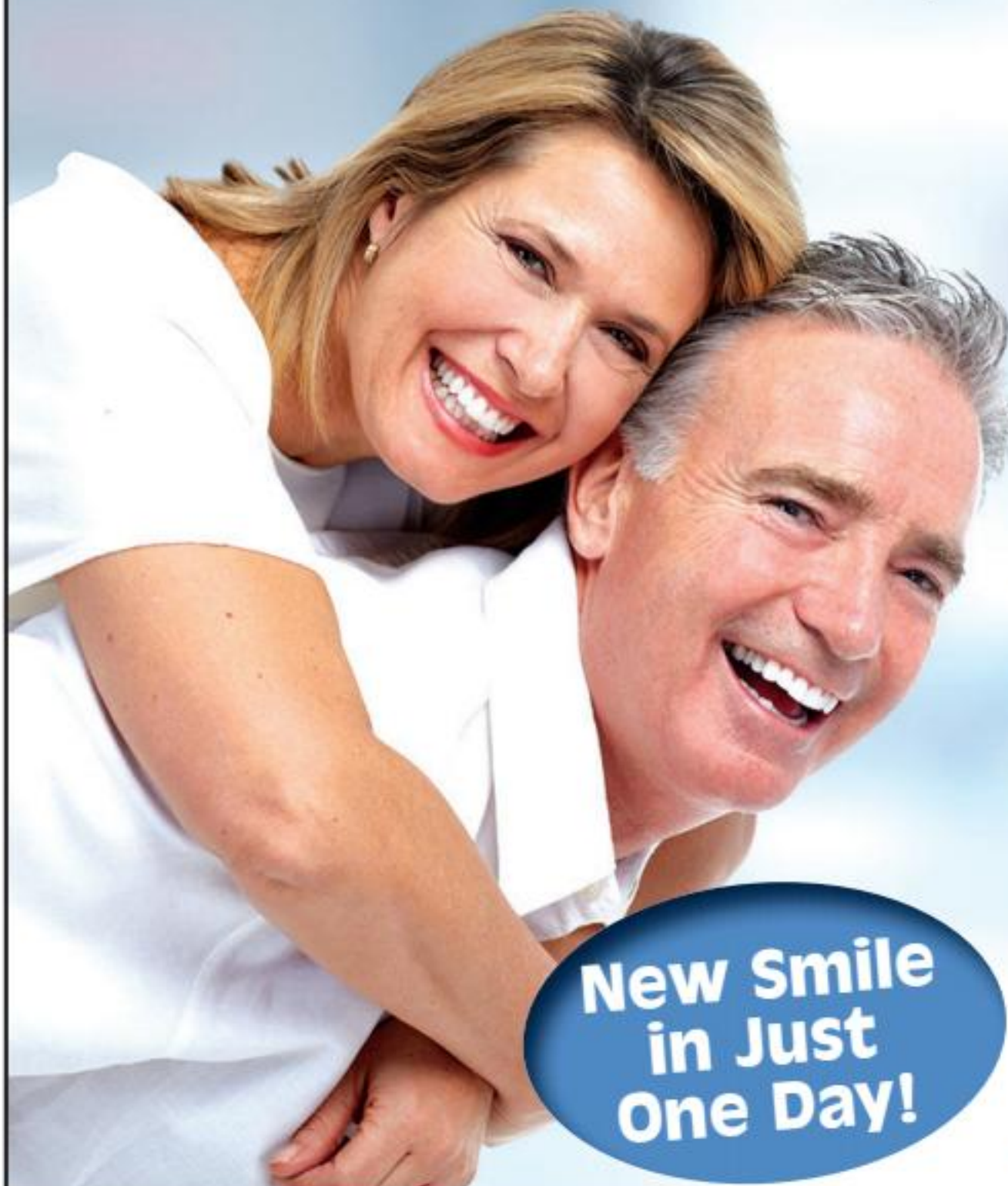


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