

'I Want to Make a Difference'

VFW's new Commander-in-Chief is a Purple Heart recipient and two-tour veteran of the Vietnam War committed to re-establishing VFW's traditional values

Sep 12, 2024

Al Lipphardt of Georgia is VFW's new Commander-in-Chief. Lipphardt, a Vietnam War veteran and life member of Post 2667 in Newnan, Georgia, says that his slogan for the year, "Follow Me," is both a nod to his military training and the example he hopes to offer for leaders at all levels of the VFW.

"I am an infantryman, and that is the infantry's motto," he said. "I tie that into my life's mantra: Believe in what you do and do what you believe in. I want to restore the military values that we all learned in basic training."

Lipphardt, a Purple Heart recipient, highlights characteristics such as loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity and personal courage that he hopes will mark his tenure.

"These qualities define leadership," he said. "Of those, integrity is the most critical because it is the only thing that truly belongs to the individual. The other qualities are earned, but integrity is yours and you only get it once."

Asked how he plans to guide America's oldest major combat veterans organization in the year ahead, Chief Lipphardt points to VFW leaders at all levels.

"I want to get people thinking," he said. "I want to make a difference in the lives of our VFW members, their families and the nation's active-duty troops. In order to make a difference, you must be the difference. As leaders, we must set the example, and that all hearkens back to 'Follow Me.'"

'THAT WAS HORRIFIC'

Lipphardt's journey to VFW's top spot began with his service in Vietnam. On Nov. 23, 1967 — Thanksgiving Day — Army 2nd Lt. Lipphardt was in Vietnam's Que Son Valley, 25 miles

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southwest of Da Nang. He was leading the 2nd Platoon of D Co., 4th Bn., 31st Inf., 196th Light Infantry Brigade.

Earlier that day, brigade commanders had intercepted an enemy radio message from elements of the 3rd Regiment, 2nd North Vietnamese Army Division, which were dug in near Hill 63 in the valley's center.

"The enemy didn't use radios with small units, so we knew it was a significant force," said Lipphardt, who had earned the Combat Infantryman's Badge three months earlier during a firefight near Chu Lai. "They sent us out immediately while the signal was still fresh."

As Lipphardt maneuvered his platoon toward a flanking position near the base of Hill 63, he remembers "all hell breaking loose" on him and his men.

"Two machine guns opened up on us from about 20 feet away," he recalled. "We had guys go down immediately."

Those killed in the ambush were Cpl. Kenneth S. Adams, Cpl. Philip F. Adams and Pfc. Robert D. Waddell.

"That was horrific," the Chief said. "I remember laying on the ground seeing the grass flipping next to me thinking, 'What is that?' Then I said to myself, 'Those are bullets. Someone can see me.'"

Lipphardt said that the 4th Platoon, in a position above the 2nd, fired over them and took out the machine guns. After moving his men to a safer position, Lipphardt assessed the situation.

"My memory was that at the end of the battle there were six of us left with the majority of the platoon wounded," Lipphardt said. "My recollection of my first tour of Vietnam is exactly that — my recollection. It's been 57 years, and I wasn't taking notes at the time."

Later that day, Lipphardt was wounded in the neck, leg and hand by grenade fragments. Treated by his medic, he did not require evacuation from the battlefield and did not think his wounds were significant.

"It was superficial," said Lipphardt, who was promoted to first lieutenant in December 1967. "I didn't even know that I had earned the Purple Heart."

That firefight, which was "close quarters" and consisted of the enemy "throwing hand grenades at us and us at them," began when Cpl. Rodney E. Loatman was shot in the head and killed.

VFW'S LAST VIETNAM VET CHIEF?

After Christmas 1967, the Army reassigned Lipphardt as an intelligence liaison officer between troops in the field and commanders. The Chief's first Vietnam tour ended when he returned to the States in June 1968.

Lipphardt went back to Vietnam for another year-long tour in 1970 as a captain and military intelligence officer. He was assigned to the Combined Intelligence Center Vietnam in Saigon.

"Saigon was a wild west town," he recalled. "I couldn't carry a weapon. I thought to myself, 'Is the war still going on?' I guess in Saigon, they thought it wasn't."

Back in the States, the Chief served from 1971-74 at the National Photographic Interpretation Center in Washington, D.C. In that role, he analyzed aerial photos and "called the Yom Kippur War" based on images he was seeing in 1973.

From 1974-75, Lipphardt served with Army Forces Command at Fort McPherson, Georgia. He worked for the deputy chief of staff for intelligence and managed the intelligence contingency fund for South America.

The Chief served in the Army Reserve from 1976-79 and departed the military on Aug. 1, 1979. Lipphardt plans to go back to Vietnam, "to Saigon," in July 2025.

"I could be the last Vietnam veteran to serve as VFW's Commander-in-Chief," Lipphardt said. "And while I have no interest in going back to the jungle, I am interested in going back to my last duty station."

'THAT'S HOW I COPE'

In addition to the four men killed on Thanksgiving Day 1967, Lipphardt noted that another of his men, Pvt. Lewis L. Sloan, had died the week before on Nov. 16, 1967, when he had stepped on a mine. Years later, the toll on Lipphardt's mental health from his time in combat became too obvious to ignore.

"I carried Loatman around in my head for 40 years because I thought that I had gotten him killed," the Chief said.

Lipphardt says he was persuaded by members at VFW Post 12002 in Alpharetta, Georgia, which he joined in 2002, to schedule a VA appointment. The appointment was specifically for Agent Orange exposure, but the topic of his discussion with the clinician soon shifted to PTSD. Lipphardt claimed he was fine, but she had her doubts.

"The clinician asked me some questions, and after about four, she stopped and said to me, 'Mr. Lipphardt, you have issues,'" he recalled. "So she made me an appointment with a

psychiatrist.”

During the appointment, Lipphardt relived the moment of Loatman’s death. The psychiatrist stopped Lipphardt when the Chief took responsibility for it.

“I told the doctor that I had instructed Loatman to move right before he was shot,” the Chief said. “I believed that if I had done that a split-second earlier, Loatman would have lived.”

Lipphardt said the VA psychiatrist explained that an enemy soldier killed Loatman, not Lipphardt. The Chief said that the PTSD counseling and therapy he received convinced him he was not to blame for Loatman’s death. It was the beginning of his recovery.

“I didn’t drink, I didn’t use drugs, I was a workaholic,” he said. “I worked all the time, two and three jobs. That’s how I coped.”

The Chief is appreciative of the help he has received, but he also says memories of the war and the men he served with will never go away.

“You ask me when I was in Vietnam,” he said, “I was there last night. It just comes and goes. You never know what might trigger memories. I’m still not back, but I never want to lose those memories. Those memories are who I am and why I do what I do. I don’t ever want to lose that.”

MILITARY MADE HIM A LEADER

After his Army service, Lipphardt turned his attention to the civilian world. For 10 years, from the mid-1980s until the mid-1990s, he sold wholesale electronic components for five major U.S. distributors in Alabama, Tennessee and Georgia. But for the Chief, it was not a rewarding experience.

“There was no loyalty in that industry,” he said. “I lost a sale over a penny, and I realized then that I had to get out of the commodity business.”

So he went into business for himself. From 2001-2013, Lipphardt owned and operated Hangups, a picture-framing business, on Fort McPherson, Georgia. He also opened Hangups stores in Lilburn, Georgia, and two locations in Stone Mountain, Georgia.

His daughter, Elizabeth, ran the business until Fort McPherson closed in 2013. Lipphardt says his military training offered him the resolve to be successful.

“It gave me discipline and commitment,” he said. “I know you can’t go into anything half way.”

It’s clear that his military training has guided Chief Lipphardt from the battlefields of

Vietnam to VFW's top spot. He also relies on an inner strength to help him.

"God looks after me," Lipphardt said. "I have a great deal of faith."

All his life experiences have made Lipphardt the person he is today. For him, though, the crux of his character was forged in the Army.

"I'm an infantry guy," he said. "I don't hesitate to make decisions because I had to make life and death decisions. That experience set me on my way to being a leader."

This article is featured in the 2024 September issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Tim Dyhouse](#), publisher and editor-in-chief of VFW magazine.