

Ex-airman still soaring

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Former SR-71, U-2 pilot named veteran of year for community service

November 02, 2008 11:14:00 PM

Retired Air Force Lt. Col. Tony Bevacqua was asked to talk about the Beale Military Liaison Committee and the air base in Yuba County at the recent Yuba-Sutter Veterans Town Hall 2008 in Marysville.

When a DVD presenting his life story appeared on two screens at the event, he realized he had been invited for more.

The longtime Yuba-Sutter resident was named as the Yuba-Sutter Outstanding Veteran of the Year 2008, selected for his service in the military and continued work in the community.

He served in the Air Force for 21 years — from 1952 to 1973 — as a pilot of the U-2 and SR-71 aircraft, later worked in real estate for many years and has been a member of the Beale Military Liaison Committee for more than 35 years.

"Tony had so many written, verbal and e-mail" nominations, said Stephanie Ruscigno, past commander of the Disabled American Veterans Chapter 9. The annual Town Hall is sponsored by the DAV chapter.

Nominations came from many people, she said, including those who had served in the SR-71 program, members of the Order of Daedalians, a fraternal organization of U.S. military pilots, and other military retirees.

The award was presented by the previous years' winners, Eric Hellberg from 2006 and Obie Wickersham, 2007.

Also nominated for the honor were Mike Hooper, named by the American Legion; John Bump, Veterans of Foreign Wars; Vernon Sorenson, veterans focus group; and Marvin King, Disabled American Veterans.

"I'm very passionate about Beale," Bevacqua, 76, said. "If I can do something to help, I sure will."

Having the base here "should be a no-brainer," he said, with its more than 23,000 acres and good weather. The liaison committee wants to keep Beale happy and keep it here.

Born in Cleveland, Ohio, Bevacqua had wanted to be a pilot when he enlisted in 1952, but hadn't thought about a career in the Air Force.

He became a pilot in the U-2 and SR-71 programs, flying reconnaissance planes over the Soviet Union, Cuba and elsewhere.

The programs' pilots were taking pictures "going as fast as we could as high as we could," he said. "We were unarmed and unafraid."

During a mission, "I was the first Air Force SR-71 pilot shot at by Russian SA 2 missiles over Hanoi in 1968." He later learned that, according to records, the shot blew up about a mile away.

His service awards include two Distinguished Flying Crosses and 14 Air Medals.

He never told his wife, Marilyn, about his missions.

"She didn't want to know what I did and I couldn't tell her anyway," he said.

The couple, living in Yuba City since 1973, have five children and nine grandchildren.

Some of his stories are part of two books — "SR-71 Blackbird — Stories, Tales and Legends" by Richard H. Graham, and "Remembering the Dragon Lady — Memories of the Men Who Shaped History in Support of the U-2 Spy Plane" by Brig. Gen. (Ret.) Gerald E. McIlmoyle and Linda Rios Bromley.

Bevacqua's biography is also part of www.roadrunnersinternationale.com, a Web site devoted to preserving the history of aviation pioneers and programs during the Cold War.

In addition to working with the Beale Military Liaison Committee, he is involved with the base's Operation Warm

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Chris Kaufman/Appeal-Democrat

Tony Bevacqua, a former lieutenant colonel in the Air Force, is the Yuba-Sutter Outstanding Veteran of the Year 2008. Shown with his Corvette Z06, he belongs to many community organizations, including several auto clubs.

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Heart, helping military families, and is a member the Military Officers Association of America and the Order of Daedalians.

His community involvement includes the Kiwanis Club, Marysville Knights of Columbus, the Amici Italiani Club and several auto clubs.

Tony Bevacqua's community involvement

Organizations include:

- Military Officers Association of America
- Beale Military Liaison Committee
- Order of Daedalians
- Kiwanis Club of Marysville
- Marysville Knights of Columbus
- Charter member of Amici Italiani Club
- Sons In Retirement
- Lector at St. Isidore Catholic Church
- MidValley Historical Auto Club
- Butte Valley Corvettes
- Chrysler 300 Club Inc.
- Chrysler 300 Club International Inc.
- Northern California Imperial Club
- Walter P. Chrysler Club
- Past member of Twin Cities Lions Club
- Past chairman of Yuba-Sutter United Way