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Bowling Green native Lt. Gen. Basham reflects on service

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Lt. Gen. Steven Basham speaks during Astral Knight 2019 media day in J Tech. Sgt. Jim Araos / U.S. Air Force

Steven Basham always wanted to fly.

Now, the three-star lieutenant general and deputy commander of U.S. European Command and Bowling Green native will have time to do just that as he is set to retire this year and return to his hometown at the beginning of August.

The 1983 graduate of Bowling Green High School attended Western Kentucky University, where he got a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering technology in 1987.

“It was a great place to grow up (and) it's a great place to come back to,” he said. “It's a very welcoming community, a great community to be from and go back to.”

Basham told the Daily News he always knew he wanted to fly airplanes and would often visit the Bowling Green-Warren County Regional Airport to watch small planes take off and land.

His first exposure to military service came from his wife Angie's uncle, Brig. Gen. Kenneth Fleenor, about halfway through Basham's college career. Basham said Fleenor, a veteran of the Vietnam War who was held captive in North Vietnam for over five years, “opened up a door” for him.

“While I aspired to fly in small aircraft, he opened up a door to flying much larger, more technical, more advanced military aircraft,” Basham said. “From that point on, I started pursuing Officer Training School.”

Basham received his commission in 1989, and one year later finished Undergraduate pilot training at Laughlin Air Force Base in Texas. Still, he didn't think a career in the military would happen for him.

"I thought I would just fly for a little while and then go do something different," Basham said. "But it turned out I enjoyed it quite a bit."

As a U.S. Air Force pilot, Basham accrued over 3,400 hours flying the B-1 Lancer, B-2 Spirit and B-52 bombers, according to his USAF bio.

He said one of his standout memories of flying came in 1999 during the combat debut of the B-2 bomber during the Kosovo War. Basham said he took off in the plane from Missouri, flew nonstop to Serbia, and flew back to Missouri nonstop.

The flight lasted 31 hours and had four refuelings.

Basham also has fond memories of piloting the B-52 bomber, which had its combat debut in 1965, the same year Basham was born.

"I don't want to call it heritage and I don't want to call it vintage," Basham said. "But when you're in an aircraft that old, and it still does an amazing job, every single sortie kind of touches you."

Basham's military service has taken him to many different areas, from posts at bases in Missouri, Alabama, North Dakota, Louisiana and Pennsylvania.

He said it is uncommon for bomber pilots to be stationed outside of the United States, but, due to "many different reasons," he found his way to the Pacific, spending a year at Osan Air Base in South Korea and two years at Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam in Hawaii.

Prior to his current assignment at EUCOM in Germany, Basham worked at the Pentagon in the Office of the Secretary of the Air Force as legislative liaison director.

In 2019, he moved to Europe to become deputy commander of U.S. Air Forces in Europe-Air Forces Africa at Ramstein Air Base, just after becoming a three-star general.

Now working as deputy commander of U.S. European Command at Patch Barracks in Stuttgart, Basham credits the "great people who have worked with me and for me" for the advancements in his career.

"I don't think any of us give credit to where we are in life without truly looking at those that helped get you there," he said. "It was really, probably, on the backs of many folks that were supporting me along the way."

When Basham first entered the Air Force, the Soviet Union still existed. He said that over his career, he has seen the decline of communism in Eastern Europe, the growth of

NATO and the rise of China.

“I think it’s clear – we have to accept that we live in a completely different world now,” Basham said, citing the Russian invasions of Ukraine in 2014 and 2022 along with tensions between China and Taiwan. “We live in a world that still has challenges.”

However, he is still optimistic about the future.

“There are always going to be countries that seek to achieve gain through force,” he said. “I think because now we have so many nations that are actually pulling together ... when we talk about territorial integrity, it means something. When we talk about sovereignty, it means something, and when we talk about international rules and norms, those mean something.”

Basham said his decades of service have made him “even more positive” on the world, saying he has been “fortunate” to have the exposure he has had to many different cultures.

He said in his career, he learned “we all want the same thing.”

“We all want a good life for our children. We always want a good place to a comfortable place to live. It doesn’t have to be anything more than that, which you would expect anyone would want,” he said. “In many ways, we’re all very similar.”

As retirement for Basham nears, he is looking forward to getting back to Bowling Green and being around his family.

“We’ve been away for a long time,” he said. “(We) have a couple of daughters that live in the U.S. It’s always very difficult being so far from your children, although they’re pretty resilient.”

Additionally, he is looking forward to taking some time to “enjoy reflecting on what we’ve been able to do over the last 36 years.”

Once he comes home, Basham plans on flying once again, albeit in aircraft much smaller than a B-52. He said there is “such a freedom” that comes with flying, no matter the aircraft.

“As soon as you take off, every war you have on the ground goes away,” he said. “For that time when you’re actually flying, there’s nothing else that matters.”

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