

New veteran service officer ready to serve

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RACINE — When Aloysius Nelson, who goes by Ali, was serving in the Persian Gulf in the 1980s, the ship that relieved his was hit by a missile, killing dozens.

“Even if you don’t know the sailor, you are part of the organization and you have a commitment and loyalty,” said Nelson, 50, of Kenosha. “It resonates with you the rest of your life.”

That was all part of Nelson’s 28-year career with the U.S. Navy, ending with his recent retirement from the Great Lakes Naval Base near North Chicago, Ill., where he served as a master chief petty officer until 2010.

Now Nelson is taking on a new challenge as the veteran service officer for Racine County. He officially started Thursday. He will serve Racine County’s approximately 15,700 veterans, according to 2010 U.S. Census data. He succeeds Richard Bayer, who passed away earlier this summer.

Nelson’s past

Nelson, who was born in Jamaica and grew up in southern Florida, enlisted in the U.S. Navy when he was 20.

“Exactly one month after my 21st birthday I went to boot camp,” Nelson said.

His first tour of duty in the early 1980s was in Keflavik, Iceland, where the U.S. worked to prevent Soviets from flying into its allies’ airspace. He later served in the Persian Gulf, in the same waters where the USS Stark was attacked in 1987. That ship replaced his, he said.

Then while he was serving in the first Gulf War, two ships near his hit floating mines.

During the time spent in combat, he didn’t sleep much. They were always anticipating something, he said.

In Nelson’s years in the

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Nelson

military, he completed a total of ten deployments ranging from the Arabian Gulf, Western Pacific, North Atlantic, Mediterranean, Indian and the Caribbean.

Even though he is now retired from the military, he will still continue his service to fellow veterans, who served.

The new job

As part of Nelson’s new job, he will be responsible for helping veterans and their families receive benefits, food and transportation assistance for people with low incomes and inevitably burial assistance.

Nelson already knows there will be challenges. He knows there are homeless veterans, some of whom have mental illnesses.

“We can offer resources,” Nelson said. But, at the same time, he said some of them don’t want assistance.

In order to provide help, he needs things like people’s Social Security numbers to verify they are veterans, he said.

“Sometimes they are not really good about giving you that information,” Nelson said.

Then there is one more even harder task, Nelson knows he may have to face.

“The hardest thing I perceive is working with a family, a mother or father, who has just lost their son or daughter and trying to provide comfort and talk to them about their benefits and entitlements,” Nelson said.

In the military he has had to talk to family members who lost loved ones.

“You only have one time to get it right,” he said.