Q&A with Johns Creek city manager
'I'm probably the last of a generation that still feels you can make government work'

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Johns Creek's new city manager, John Kachmar, has seen some things.

A Marine in 1967, he saw the USS Liberty intelligence ship attacked by Israel in the Six Day War, a controversial incident that strained U.S.-Israeli relations for years. Months later, he was wounded near the Marine artillery base at Camp Carroll, and then again at Dai Do, a hamlet near the North Vietnam border that was the scene of a furious three-day battle. He's mentioned several times in a book about the battle called "The Magnificent Bastards."

A Pennsylvania native, Kachmar (pronounced Kack-mar) was chief of staff for a Republican congressman from Pennsylvania where he helped broker compromises and write legislation. He was on a legislative mission at Kennedy Space Center when the Space Shuttle Challenger blew up in 1986.

He's served as the chief executive for counties in Minnesota, Maryland and South Carolina.

Kachmar, 59, is tall, 6-feet-3-inches, with a medium build, bald. He has a scar on his cheek where he was bayoneted. He is talkative and plain-spoken, peppering his tale with the occasional salty word or phrase. He smokes seven Marlboro Ultra Light 100s a day, but of course he does it outside.

The AJC sat down with Kachmar in his spartan office at the transition headquarters for the new city.

Q: You've had some interesting experiences. We'll start with Vietnam. You were what, just 18?
A: Maybe you should start before that.

Q: OK.
A: I left home at the age of 15. I studied to be a Roman Catholic priest for like three years at St. Charles Borromeo Seminary in Philadelphia. And then they sent me home for a couple weeks the third summer I was there, and I discovered what they meant by celibacy.

Q: This is going in the paper.
A: Yeah, I know. I discovered women. And that was the end of the seminary. Eight or nine weeks later I was at Parris Island. It was 1966. I enlisted, much to my parents' chagrin. I thought I was doing the same thing my father did in World War II, and my uncle.

Q: You joined the Marines.
A: I was trained as a rifleman. My battalion went on a battalion float and we went to the Mediterranean. I was there in June 1967 floating off the coast of Israel. It was the first time we were issued live ammunition. We ended up on the docks of Haifa for about 12 hours because they told us we would be evacuating American nationals. We went back to the ship, and I saw the shelling that night of the USS Liberty. We saw the gunflashes from 10-12 miles away, and we were told it the next morning was an American ship that it was damaged or sunk . . . We got orders in Naples for Vietnam. If you accepted them then you got 15 days' leave, if you didn't then you got 10. I said yeah. I got to Vietnam in October 1967, and I was there for 1968, which was Tet. I was in Second Battalion, Fourth Marines. I spent a year
I was up by the DMZ (Demilitarized Zone). I was outside the wire at Khe Sanh. (And) I was inside the wire.

I was at the battle of Dai Do. It was a three-day pitched battle. Most weren't like that. We went in with 840 Marines, and 156 made it back. I was lucky to survive . . . I got to meet two of the guys on the other side during a visit to Hanoi in 2004. One was a 72-year-old man, who had been a major in the NVA. Both of them had been there. It was just fascinating to them, and comparing notes and saying how wrong it was to kill each other. We all came to that conclusion, as only sane people could do.

Q: You were a congressional chief of staff. What was that like?

A: I was chief of staff for a congressman named Donald Ritter. That was 1986. It was fascinating. You get to see exactly how the federal government works. But they're all 15-hour days. It was all about compromises and deal-making. But to be honest with you, it was a little disappointing. You'd like to think there was a cleaner version of how laws are made. There are no Mr. Smiths in Washington . . . Most of the time it was hard work.

Q: You have served as a county manager in counties in Minnesota, Maryland, South Carolina, and now you're city manager in Johns Creek. Why do you stay in public service?

A: Without waxing too philosophical, I think there are things you can do to make government work. I'm probably the last of a generation that still feels you can make government work and serve people, where it's an honorable occupation and do a good job.

Q: Are you an idealist?

A: Sadly.

Q: What do you do when you're not working?

A: I backpack. I bicycle.

Q: What's the last book you read?

A: The last book I read was about Jesuit priests in America. Before that, I read a Michael Crichton novel, "Next," about genetic research. When it comes to reading, I'm all over the map.

Q: What's in your refrigerator?

A: Turducken. It's a dog food. I have a half Rottweiler-half Springer spaniel. And some Stouffer's frozen dinners. Probably breaded chicken and noodles.