

Enduring Bond

40 Years Ago, Carson Battalion Went to Vietnam

By ELIZABETH GIBSON THE GAZETTE

When the 5th Battalion 7th Cavalry left Fort Carson for Vietnam, "The Sound of Music" was playing in Colorado Springs theaters.

This week, with a different war on and the newly released movie "Miami Vice" topping the box office charts, the most decorated battalion of the Vietnam War has gathered in Colorado Springs to commemorate the 40th anniversary of its deployment to war.

About 750 veterans met at Fort Carson, but the battalion's association has tracked down the names of more than 4,000 people it believes served with it in Vietnam.

Those who came to the reunion traded stories and talked about the bonds forged in battle that never will be broken. They talked about the importance of supporting young soldiers, and a handful of Iraq war vets now serving in the battalion joined them.

Some of the Vietnam vets were uneasy about returning to Colorado Springs, because the area represents the beginning of war for them.

"I would probably have never come back to Colorado Springs," said Karl Haartz, who was a combat infantry man. "But being with the guys makes it easy."

The group began training in 1965 to go to Germany, but the Army decided it needed them in Vietnam. They had to learn to travel aboard helicopters instead of armored vehicles and became the 5th Battalion (Airmobile) 7th Cavalry.

They had from February to August to prepare.

"I was 19 when I arrived at Fort Carson," Haartz said. "When I was 20, I was on the boat going to Vietnam."

They were young and scared, the veterans said. But Hugo Lopez, who worked on training and operations, said the officers had confidence because they knew the soldiers were well-prepared.

But it was still hard, Lopez said. Because he knew many people, Lopez was often sent to identify bodies. It was always a traumatic experience: Once he found a friend shot between the eyes. Another time he had to help collect indistinguishable body pieces of a squad into a soup pot.

It also was difficult to tell who was the enemy. Don Shipley said he remembers a woman walking into the middle of his squad with explosives hidden under her baby.

"There was never a front," Shipley said. "That was the nightmare of Vietnam."

Shirts rotted right off soldiers, and people slept in grapevines when possible to avoid leaches, he said. Other times they slept in dirt holes or not at all.

Maurice Edmonds became the battalion commander in 1970 as new soldiers were replenishing the ranks. They weren't strangers long, said Edmonds, a retired major general.

"In stressful situations like combat, bonds are formed that last forever," Edmonds said.

There were plenty of stressful moments when the battalion moved into Cambodia to find caches of North Vietnamese supplies.

There, they were joined by CBS cameraman Norman Lloyd, who sent footage of them to the Evening News with Walter Cronkite.

But the world watching the battalion on TV seemed far away, the veterans said. As friends died around them, the frills of civilization seemed insignificant, Edmonds said.

For example, the Army values short hair, but faces grew scraggly in the jungle.

"It suddenly occurred to me," Edmonds said. "Who cares about hair? I saw some very brave men who couldn't have passed muster with their hair."

The battalion was deactivated in 1971, with 372 men killed and four missing in action. Four others were awarded the Medal of Honor, although only one of them came home alive.

The battalion members came home as unpopular soldiers of an unpopular war.

"We were all just young kids," said Charles Skipper, who returned from Vietnam wounded in 1968. "We were doing our job. Then we came back and people said we weren't heroes."

Some became accountants, some had grandchildren, some stuck with the military. One became a four-star general.

In the early 1990s, two veterans of the battalion started running ads looking for other members.

They started making connections, and each person they found had a mental list of more names. About 120

people came to the first reunion in 1992.

“Your first reaction is I look different now, no one will recognize me. No one will remember me. They’ve all changed too,” Edmonds said. “But the next day you know everybody. And even though they look different, in your mind they look like they did 30 years ago.”

At one reunion, Haartz recognized a picture of a building where he and two others took shelter one night. Inside, they found shelves that made good beds, Haartz said. The morning sunlight revealed they had been sleeping in coffins. With the picture, the whole story came out all over again.

Reuniting, particularly with families joining in, is therapeutic, the veterans said.

“It helps the soldiers,” said Ted Swett, the battalion’s first commander. “We’ve had wives tell us we saved their marriage because now he talks about what he went through.”

The veterans said they want today’s soldiers to have an easier time readjusting and a warmer welcome home. So they’ve sponsored a new generation of them, sometimes providing as many as six sponsor families to one person.

The 5th Battalion 7th Cavalry’s colors unfurled again in 2002 after the Sept. 11 attacks. A new set of young men departed for Iraq under the battalion’s name.

Skipper and his wife sponsored a soldier and went to the new battalion’s first homecoming. Both sides were nervous at first, but then they started talking, Skipper said.

“It’s a different sort of war,” he said. “But as for soldiers, nothing much has changed.”



HUNTER McRAE, THE GAZETTE - James Mitchell, left, from Tennessee laughed with his niece Kathy Solon, right, from Illinois as Solon’s son, Dylan, 8, looked at a photo album Thursday at Academy Hotel. While serving in Vietnam, Mitchell was shot in the head three times, blinding him.

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