Hecox: No time for fear

(Editor's note: Portions of a letter Steve Hecox wrote to his parents while on a boat bound for Vietnam appear throughout this story.)

Steve Hecox had no idea whether he would ever see family and friends again after leaving for Vietnam in the fall of 1968.

Soldiers in body bags were shipped home daily. A country on fire from napalm bombs and death in steamy jungles screamed from television sets and the pages of newspapers and magazines.

At age 20, Hecox signed up for the U.S. Army Reserves in 1965, two years after he graduated from Brady High School.

"I thought I could stay home and not have to go to Nam," Hecox said about the reason he volunteered.

VET'S DAY EVENTS

Local veterans and Gothenburg Public Schools will host Veterans Day programs.

The public is invited to Gothenburg Senior Center for a banquet this Sunday at 6 p.m. Matt Williams will speak and the GHS chorus will entertain.

Tickets are $10 and can be obtained from Jack Ostergard, Bob Bullock or Dean Kugler or at the door.

On Monday, Nov. 12, the public can attend a ceremony in the south gymnasium at the school at 10:30 a.m.

Student council president Blake Ristine will serve as master of ceremonies and veteran Jack Ostergard will speak.

The varsity band and choir will provide music.

Lunch for veterans and families will be served after the program.

He also didn't want to break family tradition. An older brother, Dick, was in the Marines in Vietnam and his father had served in World War II and Korea.

At the time, students were demonstrating against a war on the other side of the world while U.S. leaders claimed the conflict was necessary to stop the spread of Communism.

Hecox said he didn't pay much attention to all of that because "if you go in with your chin down and a bad attitude, you'll be in trouble."

Instead, they made light of what was happening.

"The college riots and everything," he said. "We were over there to do a job and we couldn't do anything about the protests here. There was no time to think about them."

"At 8:15, I mosey up to the lounge and listen to the news of the war-torn world, the hippies and yippies and of course Hubert (Humphrey) has usually made some radical statement..."

As part of the 295th Ordinance Company out of Hastings, Hecox was called for duty while attending technical school in Hastings and working for a company that built well equipment.

The company included men from Hastings, Grand Island, York and surrounding towns.

During training, at Ft. Carson, in Colorado Springs, CO, Hecox and his unit learned about jungle warfare and how to avoid punji-stick traps which were sharpened bamboo with manure on the end to cause infection. The Viet Cong used the sticks in various ways, often placing them in areas likely to be accessed by enemy troops.

“We will be unloading at Da Nang. I sure hope there are some familiar faces when I get off this boat...”

Once in Vietnam, Hecox and his unit were stationed for most of the time at supply bases in Chu Lia, on the South China Sea, and LZ Baldy, which was more inland.

From the camps, the non-combat unit hauled ammunition by truck to soldiers in the field.

“We went nowhere without a shotgunner,” he said about driving trucks filled with grenades, shells and other ammunition. “Otherwise you were a sitting duck.”

A close call Hecox will never forget happened on a trip back to base camp from company headquarters in Da Nang—a place he described as having the busiest airport in the world with incoming supplies and soldiers and outgoing bodies in bags.

“We will arrive in Da Nang at 0800, 16 Oct. 1968. Oh boy, the little butterflies have been working for about the last week. My stomach has kinda been in a tizzy.”

At any camp, he said incoming rounds from the enemy meant soldiers trying to leave had to remain until the barrage stopped and the area was safe for convoys to rumble out of the compound.

Because of enemy fire, Hecox and others stayed three nights in a row. They became antsy to get back to their own camp.

The next morning, 40 vehicles left Da Nang without security.

Within a mile of their camp, Hecox said it was just him and the shotgunner in the truck as the rest of the convoy had left in different directions.

“I told him to get ready and I floorboarded the truck to 55 mph,” Hecox said.

Bam!

Dirt and smoke from an improvised explosive device exploded behind the vehicle.

“That was as close as I ever wanted to be,” Hecox said.

Asked about fear, the now 67-year-old said he couldn’t have done the job he was sent to do if he’d been afraid.

“We tried to have a good time because we didn’t know if it would be our last,” Hecox said. “We had neutral attitudes.”

In many areas he traveled, the country’s infrastructure had been destroyed, much of the damage occurring during occupation by the French.

“You got around blown-up bridges on floating pontoons,” Hecox recalled. “There were trains in sand with no tracks.”

Hecox didn’t hesitate when asked about his biggest challenge.

“The heat. 110 to 112 degrees and 99% humidity and rain 24/7 during monsoon season.”

Soldiers took salt tablets and malaria pills daily and sweated perpetually in their hootches, which were dwellings made from bamboo.

As the war became increasingly unpopular in the States, Hecox said he never felt affected.

“We had to take care of our asses and what I did, I did for my country.”

His parents, Richard and Esther Hecox, kept track of their sons on a map of Vietnam tacked to a kitchen door.

“They wanted to see how close the fighting was to us,” Hecox said, noting that his brother returned home before he left for Vietnam. “Mom was scared to death.”

Dick was in a tank battalion in the northern mountains where fighting was horrendous, Hecox said.

“Three are getting off at Da Nang. The other two are going on to Saigon. The way the radio sounds, I don’t want any part of that area.”

Hecox remembers going home like it was yesterday after a year in the country. At Chu Lia, he and other soldiers boarded a military transport plane for Cam Ranh Bay which was still in Vietnam.

The plane couldn’t land at first because of incoming enemy rounds, which brought about an emotional response from Hecox 43 years later.

“We flew over the ocean for 45 minutes until the base was cleared,” he said. “I didn’t think I was going to make it home.”

Eventually he did and went to work as a carpenter in the Gothenburg area before joining his father in the farming operation.

“No one said much about it (the war),” Hecox said when he returned. “I don’t talk about it except with people who know what I’m talking about.”

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