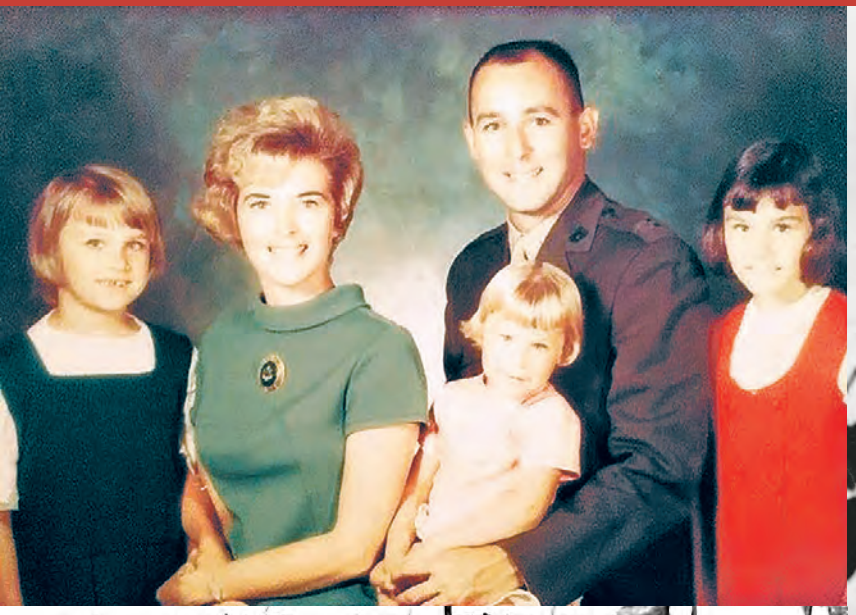
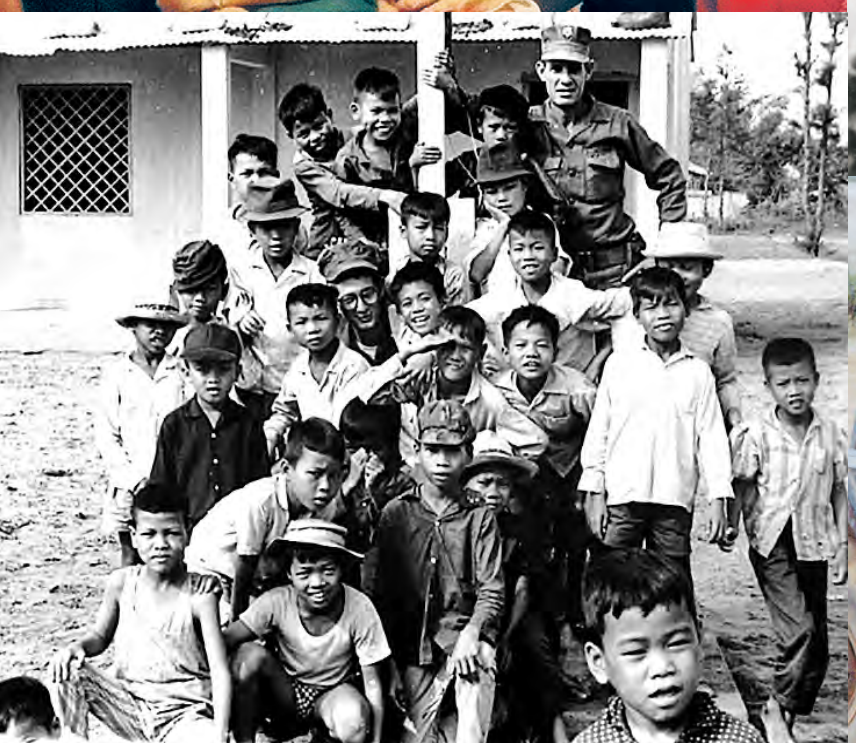
SANTA FE NEW MEXICAN

IN COUNTRY

Memories of service in Vietnam





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SANTA FE NEW MEXICAN

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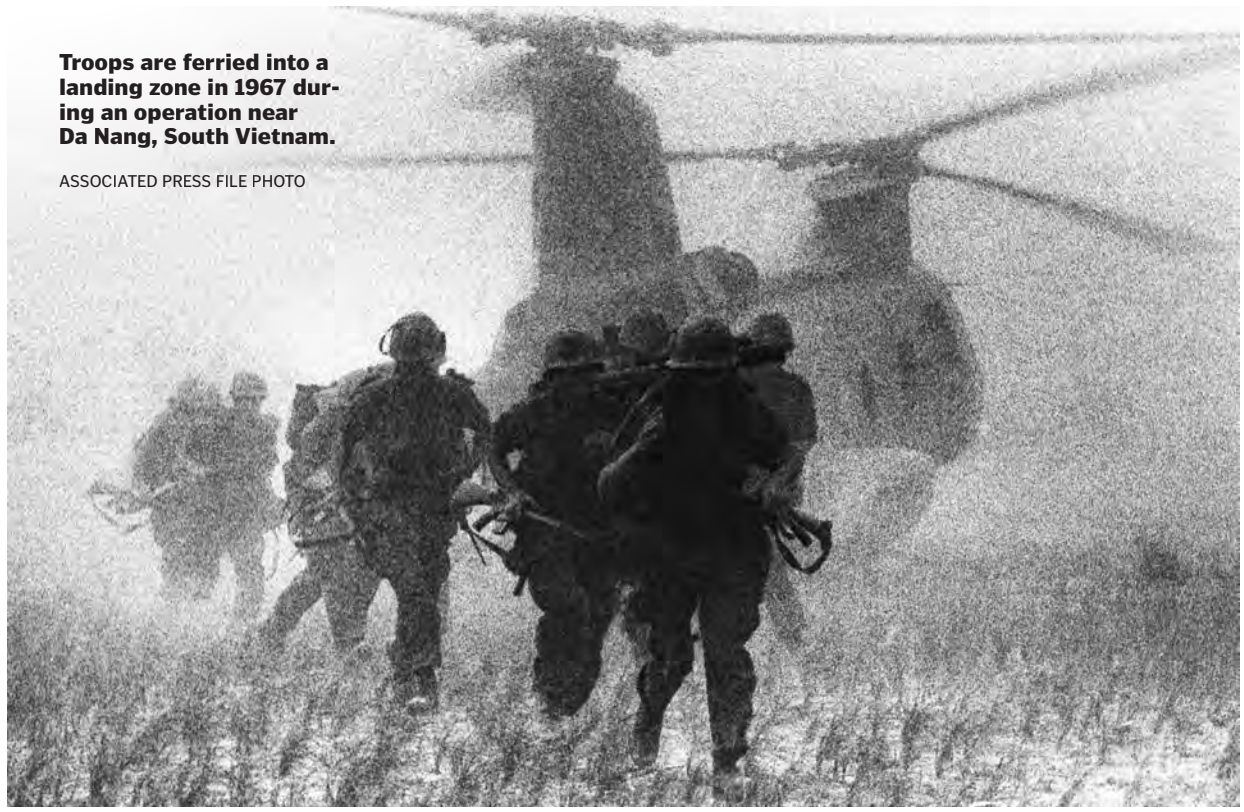

Troops are ferried into a landing zone in 1967 during an operation near Da Nang, South Vietnam.

ASSOCIATED PRESS FILE PHOTO

About this section

There's a Vietnam story for nearly every house and hovel in America, but time — the great eraser — is beginning to yellow the pages on which they are written and dim the memories of those who were there.

As hard as it is to believe, the veterans of that spectacular, unpopular war are in their 70s now — no longer young; often, no longer healthy. And as the days march on, many are leaving for good.

Fifty years after the apex of U.S. troop commitment in Southeast Asia, the *Santa Fe New Mexican* wanted to remember those who fought, died, protested and survived a war that affects America and New Mexico to this day.

"In County," our 32-page special section about those who went to war in the 1960s and early 1970s, has a simple goal — to preserve recollections of those who served in Vietnam so their sacrifices would be a reminder about how war, regardless of its intent or method, its beginning or end, changes us all.

For about six months, the newspaper asked for first-person contributions from New Mexicans who served in Vietnam. We received dozens — and not just from veterans, but from their loved ones, friends, acquaintances, fellow soldiers. Some of the stories were so compelling, we felt we had to ask more questions.

The result: Six in-depth stories about veterans or their families whose experiences offer at least a taste of what the war was about. You'll also read more than two dozen amazing first-person accounts from vets whose experience in Southeast Asia outline the vortex of human emotion: Loss, sacrifice, love, humor, pain, joy, hope, isolation.

It fell to reporter Robert Nott, himself a U.S. Air Force veteran, to collate and organize the package. His stories are accompanied by portraits stemming from the lens of longtime *New Mexican* photographer Luis Sánchez Saturno. Thanks to the generosity of many veterans, you can also see images of the war from their own cameras.

We couldn't run every story we received, and for that, I am sorry. Any omission is troublesome, because if there's something the nation learned in Vietnam, it's that every vet's story deserves to be seen, understood, appreciated.

As I write this, I think of a Vietnam veteran named Augustine Casaus Jr. He grew up in Fort Sumner, born into a home where the draft and military service were simply an accepted part of life. The kid from sandy, sunny DeBaca County was sent to a dank and verdant place called Pleiku at the height of the war, a grunt in the U.S. Army.

Exactly what my uncle did and experienced in Vietnam was a mystery to me and, probably, to a lot of people in our family. Peto, as we called him, was never much for talking, and in truth, I never had the courage to ask him about his time in Southeast Asia, at least not in any depth. It's by far the poorest reporting job of my life.

I do know that when he returned home, he built my grandmother a new bathroom at their house in Fort Sumner, tricked out a Chevy Impala and, later, got married and raised a loving, devoted family in tiny Ojo Encino, which is one helluva long way from Pleiku. I don't think that's an accident.

Peto died a few years ago, his body wilted over time by a variety of maladies; some may have sprung from his year in Southeast Asia. Every time I see a young person in uniform today, I think of him and the millions of others who served, from Da Nang to the Delta, and beyond.

Their time and their sacrifice deserve to be remembered.

Phill Casaus
editor, *Santa Fe New Mexican*

THEIR WORDS • STEVE RUDY

‘I had learned to respect people who were different from me’

I arrived at the Naval Support Activity, Da Nang, Vietnam, on Oct. 15, 1968.

Upon my arrival, I soon learned about a special unit the Navy had called Civic Action. This was an all-volunteer unit of about 70-plus men that was started by President John F. Kennedy as part of the Pacification Program. It was a sort of wartime Peace Corps. Unfortunately, while the program continued, it was no longer funded.

Once I heard about it, I inquired about joining Civic Action. But about the time I got an appointment with Civic Action’s Commanding Officer, I was also approached by the Public Affairs Office’s officer-in-charge. He had seen some of my photos laying around or drying in the Camp Tien Sha photo lab. He asked if I would join the Public Affairs Office as one of their two photographers. I responded that I wanted to talk to the people at Civic Action before making a decision.

I did have an interview with Civic Action’s Commanding Officer, Lt. Cmdr. L.O. Smith. I explained to him my qualifications, which were none. He asked why I wanted to join; I explained that I wanted to do what I could do to help the Vietnamese people to have better lives. Smith responded that he thought I was trying to fix a guilty conscience. I replied that I didn’t have a guilty conscience because I didn’t create their condition, but if I could help improve their lives, I wanted to. I got the job!

I contacted the Public Affairs Officer, thanking him for his job offer but felt I could learn more and help more in Civic Action.

On my first day, I received my ID card, which I soon learned was a “Get Out of Jail Free” card because it authorized me to be anywhere in the Da Nang area at any time. Wow! Next, I, along with the new Civic Action journalist, was offered a choice of villages to live in. Since he joined the unit before me, he got first choice, My Khe, a Buddhist village near Camp Tien Sha. I ended up in a village of Catholic Montagnard refugees. My village, Tam Toa, was mostly mud and thatch huts located on Da Nang Bay.

My team lived in a disused Quonset hut with a bucket in a well for water and no electricity. The village had about 2,500 refugee families and, with my arrival, five Navy enlisted men, all of very low rank.

The only thing missing was a job for me. I was told to look around, figure out what needed to be done, decide how to do it, and go for it. One team member, Dave, was the village doctor. He had a liberal arts degree and no medical experience whatsoever. With the part-time guidance of a Navy corpsman, he treated hundreds of people for everything from gunshot wounds to injuries sustained when hit by a Navy truck to treatment for rabies bites. He was in his third voluntary, consecutive tour when I arrived. Out of necessity, Dave had also taught himself fluent Vietnamese. ...

As for me, I looked around and saw young street urchins wandering around with little to do other than play simple, homemade games. Occasionally, they helped their family fish and do what other work they were capable of.

Steve Rudy, center in glasses, served in the Navy in South Vietnam, where he helped educate children in the village of Tom Toa. COURTESY PHOTO

I decided that my project would be to find American sponsors to help these children go to school. I learned that to get a child into school, we would have to reimburse the family for lost wages, amounting to about $6 per month. Next, I started a scholarship program for children in all the villages we had teams in. There were 77 of us in the unit living in 15 villages in the Da Nang area.

First, I went around photographing the angelic, disheveled children. I had the Public Affairs office print posters asking for sponsors. In addition to plastering the posters on U.S. military bases throughout I Corps, I had members of the unit send posters, along with an explanation, to churches and synagogues back in the States. By the end of six months, we had sponsors for 450-plus children. ...

I finished my tour of duty and returned Oct. 15, 1969. This one brief year living in a Vietnamese village in the middle of the “Americans’ War,” (as the Vietnamese put it), changed my life and what is really important to me. I had learned to respect people who were different from me, regardless of their economic condition, and try to help as much as I can those less fortunate. These are lessons I live by today. And I have been back to Vietnam and Tam Toa twice since the end of the war.

FRANCIS X. NAVA

THE FIRST COMBAT DEATH

Raymond Nava, younger brother of Francis X. Nava, the fresh-faced youth from Santa Fe who went off to fight in the Vietnam War, stands near his brother's grave at the Santa Fe National Cemetery in 2017.

LUIS SÁNCHEZ SATURNO
NEW MEXICAN FILE PHOTO

By Robert Nott
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The grainy, scratchy color film footage from the late summer of 1965 shows a barrel-chested Francis Xavier Nava, 18 and fresh out of boot camp, clad in ranchero attire and practicing his draw with a revolver at a family ranch in Northern New Mexico.

He repeatedly pulls the gun out fast, quick-draw style, taking time to add some flashy twirling tricks as if he is playing John Wayne. At the end of the reel, Nava turns and aims the gun at the camera, offering a slight smile for the audience.

At the time the footage was taken by a family member, Nava was home on leave following basic training. He was about to head to Vietnam. He had enlisted in the Marine Corps in February of '65 with the plan of graduating from Santa Fe High School that May and entering the service shortly thereafter.

Flash forward a year. The scene is a U.S. Marine compound somewhere in Vietnam, and this time the home-movie camera captures Nava clad in combat fatigues. He's wearing a .45 semi-automatic pistol, and he's still practicing his draw for the camera. Only there's no flash, no twirling theatrics. It's clear he knows this is no longer a game.

It's real life.

But it was death that came to Francis Nava in September 1966, just two months before his tour of duty in Vietnam was to end. He was the first Santa Fean to die in combat in Vietnam, and his death brought the war home to a small, close-knit community that had been spared the grim news that was beginning to shadow towns and cities throughout the nation.

Nava's name lives on in the community in the form of Nava Elementary School. In October 1968, the school board unanimously voted to name the

new school on Siringo Road after the fallen Marine. To this day, students there learn about his legacy and take part in annual Veterans Day parades in Santa Fe to honor his memory.

"He was like a candle — he lit so fast and extinguished so early," said Nava Elementary School history teacher William Rodriquez.

Nava's sacrifice, he added, allows the school's leaders to instill a sense of community service in older students.

"We were both little kids, 18-, 19-year-old boys who were entrusted to take action in a situation where we had to grow up fast and face danger."

Gilbert Ulibarri, who grew up with Francis Nava, pictured above, and served with him in Vietnam

"We're named after a veteran, but it's not about being gung-ho, 'Join the Marines,' " Rodriguez said of keeping Nava's memory alive. "It's about learning to help our community in need. It's about teaching them that they can serve their country by taking part in volunteer projects."

To those who remember Nava the man, not just the name, the memories are both raw and tender.

Gilbert Ulibarri, who grew up with Nava and ended up serving with him in Vietnam, recalls the kid who grew up overnight. Both were assigned to 2nd Battalion, 4th Marine Regiment — known in the field (and to themselves) as "The Magnificent Bastards."

"We were both little kids, 18-, 19-year-old boys who were entrusted to take action in a situation where we had to grow up fast and face danger," said Ulibarri, who got to Southeast Asia in January 1966 and left in March 1967.

Luckily for Ulibarri, he had someone from home in his unit. In Vietnam, Ulibarri and Nava would share stories of the girls they dated, the guys they knew, the things they liked to do in Santa Fe in the years before the war engulfed the nation and the city.

Not long before his death, Nava talked with Ulibarri about being a "short-timer" — he had only two months left to serve before he could return home to Santa Fe.

Ulibarri wrote his mom in early September to say Nava would be home in November.

But on Sept. 10, 1966, as Ulibarri's unit came under attack, he heard over the radio that Nava's company had suffered casualties in a firefight. Nava's younger brother, Raymond, said he never found out how his brother died.

After safely returning to base, Ulibarri was told Nava was dead. He refused to believe it, so he visited the makeshift morgue where the Marines kept the bodies of the fallen.

"There were body bags all over," he recalled. "I saw one with the tag: Francis Nava. I didn't open it. I was really distraught. I've carried that burden with me for years."

The weight is shared by many, even now — all those years after a would-be cowboy pointed a pistol at a camera, perhaps certain the future would be his for the taking.

At a small house on Baca Street, the address where Francis Nava grew up, Raymond Nava remembers the day a government vehicle with a Marines logo pulled up at the curb. It was a Sunday, Sept. 11.

"I rushed right over to see what was going on," Raymond Baca recalled. "That's when I learned my brother had lost his life."

His father, Stanley Baca, did not have the heart to tell his wife, Rose, who was working at a downtown hotel that day. Instead, he arranged for a local priest to break the news when she returned home.

When the priest told her, "She broke down right there, real hard," Raymond Nava said. "She was never the same after that."

His family buried Francis Nava at Santa Fe National Cemetery later that month.

And the war came home to Santa Fe.

Shortly after, local veterans groups began lobbying the school board to name a school under construction after Nava. The board unanimously approved the idea, and the school held an open house ceremony in May 1969. It opened the following August.

Francis X. Nava Elementary is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year and has about 230 students enrolled — many of whom will take part in this year's Veterans Day parade in Santa Fe.

Ulibarri, who said he attended that May 1969 open house, has taken some comfort in knowing a local school keeps Nava's name alive.

Raymond Nava is grateful as well. Watching the home-movie footage his brother sent back from Vietnam, he said it's difficult to sometimes view his older brother as the young, vibrant man full of potential and hopeful for a future back home.

"He was born on Christmas Day, 1946," Raymond Nava said. "That means he would have been 73 this Christmas.

"It would be nice to have him here."

THEIR WORDS
MARK FLEISCHER

'I'm from Texas, you know'

I was in Vietnam from mid-September 1967 to mid-September 1968, serving as a combat news reporter with the 7th Air Force Directorate of Information. Although based at Tan Son Nhut Air Base, outside of Saigon, I reported on operations at several places, including Da Nang, Phan Rang, Sông Bé, Can Tho, as well as in Thailand.

A few days before Christmas 1967, I was assigned to a team covering President Lyndon B. Johnson's visit to Korat Royal Thai Air Force Base in Thailand, where he presented medals and brought a holiday message to the troops. Air Force One arrived very early in the morning — about 2 a.m., as I recall — and the military press were arrayed in a U-shaped formation as President Johnson "worked" the line. I was festooned with a camera, tape recorder and notebook, and within minutes, the president stood before me, his massive hand outstretched. I grasped his hand and the following conversation ensued.

LBJ: "Where y'all from, sergeant?"

Me: "New York, sir."

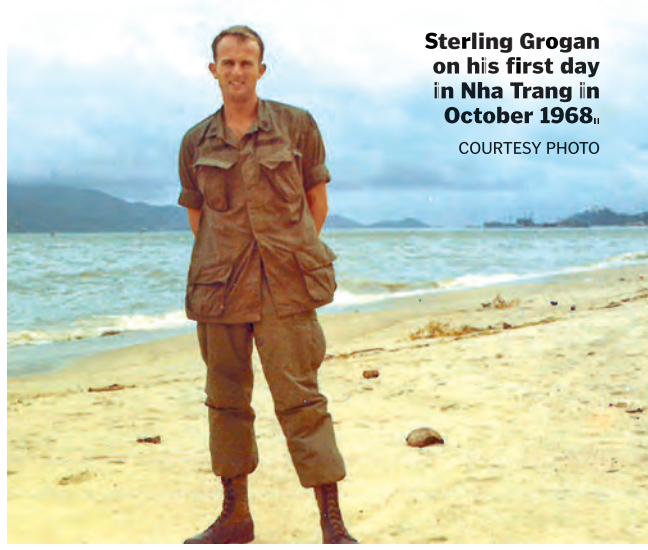
LBJ: "New York — mighty fine state, mighty fine state. ... I'm from Texas, you know."

Me: "Yes sir, I've heard that."

Mark Fleischer in November 1967 in Dalat, South Vietnam. COURTESY PHOTO

THEIR WORDS · STERLING GROGAN

‘It was exciting and terrifying’



Sterling Grogan on his first day in Nha Trang in October 1968.
COURTESY PHOTO

In 1966, I was preparing to stay for another two years in the Peace Corps in Brazil. But my draft board had a different idea, so when I received a draft notice I enlisted in the Army, thinking I could somehow avoid landing in the infantry. After a year in Vietnamese language school in El Paso, I arrived in Vietnam in September 1968, assigned to the 8th PSYOP Battalion’s propaganda development center in beautiful seaside Nha Trang.

My job was to write leaflets to be dropped by the Air Force on civilians and communist soldiers, warning them of the death and destruction that the U.S. Army, Navy and Air Force would rain down on them if they didn’t surrender or move into “strategic hamlets” — thinly disguised concentration camps surrounded by barbed wire and guarded by ethnic Chinese militias.

Occasionally, I was called on to interpret for U.S. or Korean intelligence officers interrogating captured communist prisoners. I always walked out and refused to interpret when the interrogators wanted to torture their captives (which they usually did), and the job drove me nuts. It was easy to see that U.S. efforts were not only ineffective, but in many ways, they were driving the civilian populace of South Vietnam into the hands of the communists. We had already lost the war with the Tet uprising in February 1968, but our generals and politicians were too dishonest to admit it.

The black comedy *Catch-22* got it right. Being in the war, but being in the rear, rather than in combat, produced a kind of insanity that would later be brilliantly depicted in the movie *Apocalypse Now*. Every day after work, I walked to the nearby beach, swam in the warm sea, visited the French restaurants in town, got wasted sitting on the roof of our hooch watching the communist artillery in action on the mountains west of town.

After four months, in the firm grip of that insanity, I volunteered to join the infantry in the Central Highlands. There, at the 3rd Battalion of the 173rd Airborne Brigade, I was assigned to lead a five-man “psychological operations” (i.e. propaganda) team. Of the 44 provinces in South Vietnam, we operated in Lam Dong, which the CIA classified as the 44th in terms of military priority, and that is why I, a mere sergeant, was assigned a job that would normally be that of an officer.

We had a small truck that carried all the equipment to show Disney movies (with Vietnamese soundtracks) in villages tenuously “secured” by our infantry. Because I spoke fluent Vietnamese, I was often tasked with paying civilians who had suffered some form of damage from Army action: death of a loved one, loss of a buffalo, destruction of a house or an important big tree. We also had a Huey helicopter at our disposal, into which we would put our 1,000-watt loudspeaker system. The idea was to speak to civilians on the ground (we could be heard for a mile on either side of the chopper) to encourage them to leave so-called “free fire zones” where they would be killed by the Army, and occasionally we would broadcast “surrender or die” messages to communist soldiers while they were shooting at us.

It was exciting and terrifying, but I loved the flying. Cruising along at treetop level at 100 mph, sitting on the floor hanging my feet out with the doors open. What a rush! To and from our “targets” we would play acid rock over the loudspeaker. Our chopper was named “Surrealistic Pillow” in honor of the band Jefferson Airplane.

Part of my job in the battalion was to manage our small group of Hoi Chanhs, the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army soldiers who had defected, usually due to being wounded and abandoned in combat by their officers. They were given the choice of going to prison or becoming scouts for the American infantry. In the evenings when they were not out on patrol, we would sit on the floor in my hooch and talk politics. I was surprised to learn that their view of the war was similar to our own: It was a stupid waste of lives and money, and all they wanted to do was go home and grow rice. One of the Hoi Chanhs had been in the North Vietnamese Army for more than 20 years and had walked the Ho Chi Minh trail from Hanoi to Saigon more than a dozen times.

When I got home in September 1969, I joined the anti-war movement at the University of Florida. I couldn’t imagine doing anything else after what I had seen in the war. Most of the senior Army officers and NCOs I had known were cowardly drunks, too inept to prevent their troops from being needlessly killed. The Army was one big, enabling organization, seemingly designed to provide a living for men who could not survive in anything other than dysfunction. Art therapy eventually taught me how to live with my own post-traumatic stress disorder, but I am constantly reminded that many of the guys I served with never came home, or if they did, they never got over what the Vietnamese called “The American War.”

THEIR WORDS · JOHN CHRISTOPHER ABEYTA

‘I interact as a veteran who understands’

My Vietnam veteran story is about today and not so much about incidents in the past. I am a member of a veterans group at the Vet Center here in Santa Fe. The group includes vets from all eras, from Korea to now, but the majority are Vietnam vets.

In this group, we share happiness and sorrow, we laugh and cry together. We give our understanding to the others through words, a hug or just a glance of encouragement. We sing our songs in English and Spanish to the group, and they just listen or sing along. Some of those songs are memories of home or of the jungle.

I interact as a veteran who understands. I take in the feelings of my veteran *familia*. If a brother or sister cries or laughs, so do I. If they speak of pain in the past or pain in the present, I take it in and it becomes part of me. I understand as a Vietnam veteran and I forgive those who do not understand.

Veterans Day is every day, and it is what we do daily to support ourselves that matters. We give to each other and thank those who give to us.

I am a veteran who is part of a group of individuals that have come together in understanding. Diversity does not separate us. There is a common ground and a common spirit that is deep and indefinable, and we are there for each other as a *familia*.

“Veterans Day is every day, and it is what we do daily to support ourselves that matters. We give to each other and thank those who give to us.”

John Christopher Abeyta

SANTA FE NEW MEXICAN

IN COUNTRY

Memories of service in Vietnam

THEIR WORDS • DOMINIC LOCRASTO

‘On Memorial Day, I remember his young, smiling face’

Camp Evans, June 1968.

They were new, so damned new. It wasn’t their new clothes, new boots, new everything. They were clean — their faces, their hands — new and clean. And young. I was 21, yet to me, they were young.

I was near the end of my year, and I was staying out of sight, paying others to take my place on perimeter guard, volunteering to burn excrement, anything to stay safe. I was going home in a few weeks. They just got here.

They were medics. Medics did six months with one of the line companies, and six months here in battalion headquarters. The lucky ones got to go back to base camp. Was it safer there? Who knew?

They came to me for military driver’s licenses. The old-timers were probably goofin’ on them, saying that they needed licenses to drive. There was nothing for them to drive and nowhere to go. I did licenses for our drivers. Sgt. Matthews had given me the authority when he first arrived. A 40-something uneducated black man from northwestern Florida and a career soldier, he used his regular Army influence to get out of being in a line company. He didn’t have the skills for what he had to do, so I covered for him, and part of that was issuing military driver’s licenses. In return, Matthews looked out for me, and the life lessons learned from him turned a 20-year-old boy into a 21-year-old man.

I was in the shade when I saw the medics coming, asking for me. It was midday and it was hot. It was always hot. The sun was shining on their clean, young, smiling faces. The blonde one did all the talking.

I gave them each my test.

“Do you know how to drive?”

“What do you want to drive?”

A Jeep was the usual answer to the second question.

I filled out the orange card, teased them about being new, and they were gone.

They were assigned to line companies and left for their units the next morning.

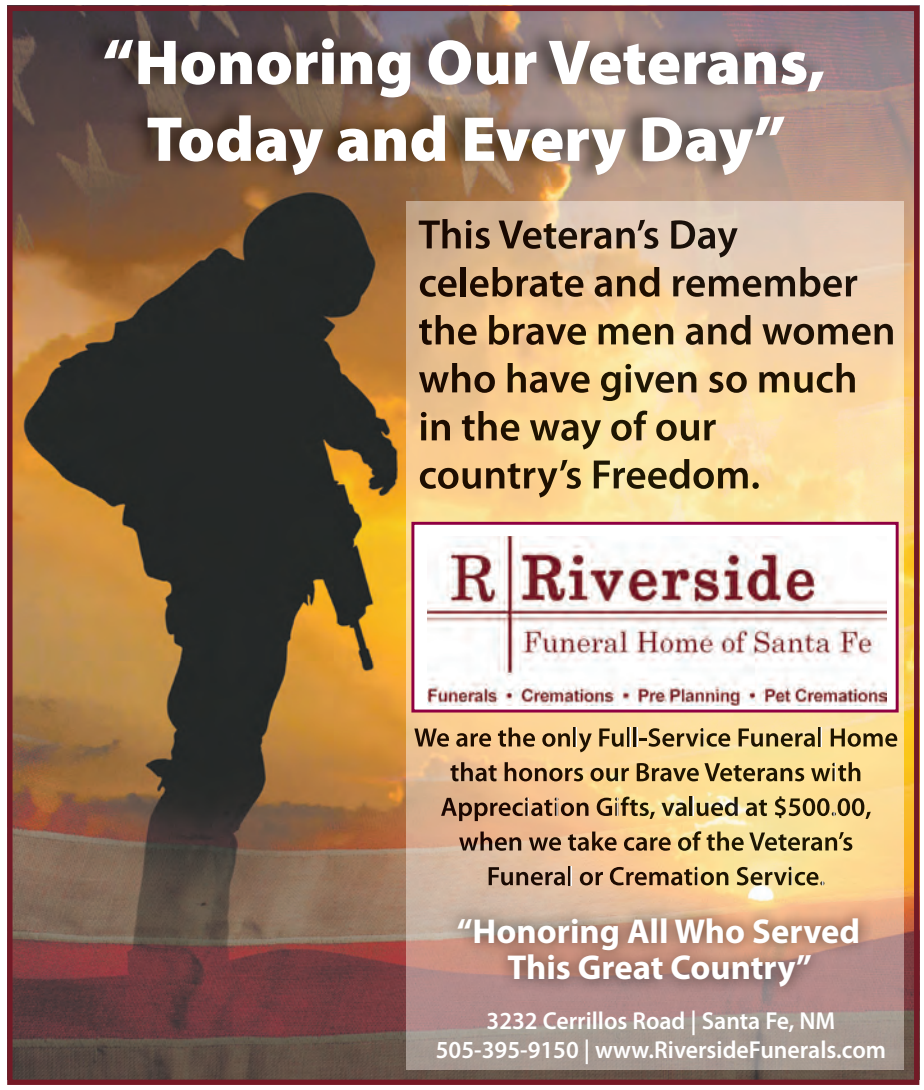
A day or so later, a mule (a small vehicle used for moving small cargo short distances) driver came back from the helicopter pad with two KIA (killed in action). One of the medics from the other day was one of them.

Graves Registration was contacted and came with a Jeep pulling a wagon-like trailer. The bodies were thrown into the trailer and covered with a poncho. I watched them go, their lifeless legs moving with each bump, the bottoms of their boots moving up and down, an image that is still with me.

So new, so clean, so very young. Now the young medic was going home.

More than 50 years ago, I knew him for 10 minutes. I forgot his name shortly after he walked away. But I’ve never forgotten him, and on Memorial Day, I remember his young, smiling face.

Dominic LoCrasto in Vietnam in April 1968. COURTESY PHOTO



Tomas Silva's tattoo commemorates his role as a former Huey crew chief and gunner in the Vietnam War. "I had a sense of reasoning,' he said. 'There was a war, and I went.'"

LUIS SÁNCHEZ SATURNO
THE NEW MEXICAN

TOMAS SILVA

CHANGED BY COMBAT

By Robert Nott
rnott@sfnewmexican.com

Tomas Silva saw his first dead body at Cam Ranh Bay the day he arrived in Vietnam.

Then he threw up.

"I said, 'What the hell did I get into?' " recalled the Santa Fe native, also known as Tom and Tommy.

During the year he served in Vietnam as a crew chief and gunner on a UH-1 Huey helicopter, in 1967 and '68, he got used to seeing blood and loss and death all around him. And he got used to killing.

He also got to like it.

"I was good at it," said Silva, now 72, and one of about 57,000 Vietnam-era veterans living in New Mexico.

That war took the lives of about 400 New Mexicans. Silva was determined to stay off that list, regardless of what he had to do to survive.

The odds were not good. According to an *Air and Space/Smithsonian Magazine* article, "Between 1966 and 1971, one Army helicopter was lost for every 7.9 sorties — 564 pilots, 1,155 crewmen and 682 passengers were killed in accidents alone. More Hueys — often used as ground-support gunships — were downed in Vietnam than any other type of aircraft."

Silva had willingly joined the U.S. Army in June 1967, just one month after graduating from St. Michael's High School. His parents wanted him to enter the Air Force. His English teacher told him to go to college.

But Silva, who said he was indifferent to his future at the time, looked at it another way.

"I had a sense of reasoning," he said. "There was a war, and I went."

Following basic training, he was sent to Fort Rucker in Alabama to study helicopter mechanics. When they began teaching him about the various weapons onboard — miniguns, rockets, the machine gun — he knew he was in for trouble.

He put in for crew chief and was accepted, quickly learning the fighting potential for the chopper was largely in his hands. He spent nights sleeping in his helicopter because he wanted to be ready to go when the call to action came. He said pilots with the 71st Assault Helicopter Company, his unit, enjoyed flying with him because his ships were prepared and he was considered lucky — he and his choppers continued to survive, regardless of the number of missions.

"Everybody liked flying with Tommy," said Chuck

"I consider Tommy a hero. He did his job. And we were in combat a lot. We got shot up quite a bit. He always did a good job, always helped us to get there and back."

Chuck Carlock,
a former Huey pilot who flew with Tomas Silva, left

LUIS SÁNCHEZ SATURNO/THE NEW MEXICAN

Carlock, a former Huey pilot who wrote a first-person account of the war called *Firebirds*. "He did his job and never complained. After I'd been there a while, I figured out if there's something wrong with the helicopter, you're probably not gonna get the job done. Tommy is one crew chief I trusted. When he said it's ready to go, it's ready to go."

All these years later, Carlock recalled Silva's skill as a gunner: "Tommy was good at it — you never had to tell him anything twice."

Silva said he worked hard not to make friends, preferring to stay alone.

"I didn't like being around people," he recalled, though he pulled out a huge, black and white photo, circa spring 1968, showing him with five military buddies and a dog on the airstrip at Chu Lai, where he was stationed.

His 19-year-old face looks years older in the photo.

"I was hard," Silva said.

He was sleeping in his helicopter when the Tet Offensive — perhaps the seminal moment of the war — began in January 1968. As both North and South Vietnamese civilians celebrated their lunar New Year, known as Tet, North Vietnamese soldiers and Viet Cong guerrillas started their largest attacks to date. They hit military and civilian targets ranging from South Vietnam's capital in Saigon to bases large and small throughout the country, including Chu Lai.

Silva remembers North Vietnamese and Viet Cong soldiers "everywhere" as the fighting surged: Rockets, mortars, small arms, bombs. U.S. and allied aircraft were dispatched to help besieged ground groups.

Dark humor abounded among the helicopter crews, who always fell back on rote mantras: "We're going to heaven because we've already spent a year in hell," was one. "We're in the killing business — and business is good," was another. "We will see death and carnage — and it means nothing," was a third.

On his last full day of service in country, Nov. 19, 1968, Silva was astonished — and frightened — to be assigned to one last flight.

"I thought, 'This is gonna be my bad day,' " he said.

It wasn't, though, and he started his return home the next day. But his year in Vietnam had taken its toll, emotionally and psychologically. When his mother first saw him upon his return to New Mexico following his tour, she said, "What did they do to you? You're not my son who went off to war."

It wasn't easy coming back, Silva said. It still isn't. Today he relies on more than 20 types of medicine, some needed to treat physical and emotional trauma he suffered in the war, to get through each day. He has held a number of jobs. He's divorced and lives alone in an apartment complex in midtown Santa Fe. His companion is a cat.

He said he doesn't like talking about his experiences with other veterans, wary of those who say they served during Vietnam but never saw combat. He noted some of them in turn say he's a phony who never saw the war.

Carlock, however, said Silva is the real thing.

"I consider Tommy a hero," he said. "He did his job. And we were in combat a lot. We got shot up quite a bit. He always did a good job, always helped us to get there and back."

Silva is glad he got back, though memories of the war still haunt him.

He has not picked up a gun since leaving Vietnam.

"I know," he said, "the damage a gun can do."

Tomas Silva, standing second from left, in a 1968 photo he keeps from his time serving as a helicopter crew chief and gunner in Vietnam.

LUIS SÁNCHEZ SATURNO
THE NEW MEXICAN

Kenton Krohlow says he 'served with Oliver Stone — if you saw the movie *Platoon*, you know that part of my story.'

COURTESY PHOTO

THEIR WORDS
KENTON KROHLOW

'It's the hardest physical labor you will ever know'

If I tell you I'm a veteran, what images cross your mind? World War II victory parades? Tanks in the desert? If I modify that, tell you I'm a Vietnam veteran, what then? Homeless? Rambo? Students in the streets, carrying signs?

I'm a Vietnam veteran. I found college boring, so I found myself in combat at age 18. Served with Oliver Stone — if you saw the movie *Platoon*, you know that part of my story. And war is hell: It's scary, it's exhilarating, it's the hardest physical labor you will ever know. You're flying nap-of-the-Earth, 60 feet at 60 knots, tracers burning past your head — believe me, you're fully engaged.

The Vietnam experience includes the "war at home." What a slog that's been. No parade, no prestige, the students in the streets became the school administrators, evaders advanced unrepentant. We brothers soldiered on — credentials, marriages, careers and now the harvest.

Would I change anything? Some things, yes; we all have regrets. But the military — hell, no. It was the road less traveled, it was my Thoreau, experiencing life.

John Heinritz served as an officer in the Army during the Vietnam War. COURTESY PHOTO

THEIR WORDS · JOHN HEINRITZ

‘We became numb to the daily rocket barrages’

I graduated from the College of Santa Fe in May 1967. I returned to Wisconsin, where the draft followed me shortly after. I decided to join the Army in order to attend Officer Candidate School at Fort Benning, Ga. After earning my commission in October 1968, I was assigned to the Berlin Brigade. So in my brief three years in the Army, I was in the worst of the Cold War in Berlin and then part of a helicopter battalion in Chu Lai, Vietnam. The battalion included aero-rifle platoons, Cobra gunships and Hueys. We covered the Demilitarized Zone and across to the Ho Chi Minh Trail and even into Cambodia.

In addition to flying front seat on Cobra gunships, I was ultimately assigned to the role of battalion adjutant. Part of my role as adjutant was to prepare letters for the commander’s signature sent to parents and loved ones of those who were lost in combat — probably the most difficult part of my assignment. We were located right on the South China Sea and became a regular target for incoming rocket fire from the enemy as they attempted to take out our helicopters.

We lost a number of choppers from enemy fire, weather conditions and accidents. We became numb to the daily rocket barrages, and what we didn’t realize is the high level of adrenaline that we experienced on a day-to-day basis would be difficult to deal with when we returned home. Many of us deal with post-traumatic stress disorder as a result.

But it didn’t prepare us for when we returned home to Oakland, Calif., where we were told not to wear our Army uniforms, as protesters would berate us when they saw us in uniform. The protesters also made it important for us to quickly put aside our emotions and memories of the war. Those buried memories and emotions took a toll on relationships, so the war damage continued for many years.

I feel privileged to have served my country and cherish the memories of the men I served with under the most challenging conditions. I earned a Bronze Star with oak leaf cluster, but what I experienced and learned in those three years was foundational for the leadership roles I would assume in my career. But I also know my daughter was also a victim of the war, as her early years were impacted by my struggles in dealing with the buried memories that haunted me for years. I returned to Santa Fe eight years ago.

THEIR WORDS • KEN DETTELBACH

‘Agent Orange and post-traumatic stress disorder followed me home’

I arrived in Vietnam in early 1966 and based at Bien Hoa Air Base, a U.S. Army captain in the 4th Transportation Battalion, Company C. Our mission was to construct, maintain and supply forward military bases with personnel and materials. The first day in Vietnam, I assisted our graves detail in sending home the fallen.

Without drawing on specific memories, I traded in my carbine for a shotgun, supported the 18th Cavalry Regiment and Big Red One (1st Infantry Division) at Phu Vin and Phu Loi, and helped to train ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) troops at Nha Trang. My time in Vietnam spent with U.S. Army Procurement Agency-Vietnam created friendships that lasted back home, like Maj. Leo Piasecki, who once drove for Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower; Capt. James Lawler, a Boston College graduate; and Lt. Col. Dan Chenevert, who helped me get a Military Air Transport Service flight home for Christmas.

Agent Orange and post-traumatic stress disorder followed me home. My brother helped me get straight, and I learned two things about myself that allowed me to get back into society and my family:

1. I had a conscience about leaving my military family and making it back home.

2. I didn’t want to get too close to anyone for fear of losing them.

Today I devote my life in helping other vets as founder of R&R For Vets and participation in local veteran affairs.

Ken Dettelbach, top right, served in the U.S. Army during the Vietnam War and is the founder of R&R For Vets.

PHOTOS COURTESY KEN DETTLEBACH

THEIR WORDS • JOHN J. MARTINEZ

‘When being processed in camp in Thailand, I was asked if I typed’

I volunteered to serve in the U.S. Army in October 1969. I was a 1965 graduate of Santa Fe High School and a 1969 graduate of the College of Santa Fe. I completed Basic Combat and Advance Army Administration School at Fort Ord, Calif., and served with the 256th Personnel Services Company, Camp Samae San near Sattaship, Thailand.

When being processed in camp in Thailand, I was asked if I typed. I said yes, that I have a degree in business education and was certified to teach typing in my home state. He turns around on his swivel chair and tells the master sergeant in charge that he just found a typing teacher. The master sergeant simply said, “Put him in the Special Orders Section.”

Two of the typists in the section were near the end of the mandatory 12-month tour of duty, and I would be a replacement. The Special Orders Section had a room full of machines called Flexowriters. The machines were the computers of the day. The machines operated with hole-punched cards that the typist prepared. With the help of the machines, the typists prepared hundreds of special and general orders per week for signature by the officer in charge.

We were on call 24/7, a demanding job, and I really liked it. I was promoted very quickly and sometimes put in charge of the section under filling, a staff sergeant position.

JO ANNE H. SINGER

WIDOW'S SADNESS AND ANGER

Jo Anne H. Singer holds a flag and portrait of her late husband, U.S. Army Capt. Norman Singer, a doctor who died in Vietnam. Her husband, she said, willingly went to serve and refused to look for a way to avoid the war.

LUIS SÁNCHEZ SATURNO
THE NEW MEXICAN

By Robert Nott
rnott@sfnewmexican.com

The moment Jo Anne H. Singer opened the door and saw the two uniformed U.S. Army soldiers standing before her, she knew.

Then came the five words she dreaded: *"We regret to inform you ..."*

Her husband, 29-year-old U.S. Army Capt. Norman Singer, a doctor, had been killed on May 18, 1969 when North Vietnamese troops attacked his artillery base near Xuan Loc.

Jo Anne Singer was about to go out and mow the lawn the day she got the news in Norman, Okla. But after hearing those awful words, her thoughts turned to her napping 1-year-old daughter, Kyle, and her 3-year-old son, Erik, who was in a preschool program.

She didn't know what questions to ask the two men in uniform, so she called her father, who had served in the Army, and he drove to her home.

She recalls leaning down to look Erik in the eyes to tell him what had happened as she walked him home from school that day. When she told him the U.S. government had sent his daddy to war, he put his hands on his hips and told her that seemed "wrong."

Singer, who turns 80 this month, says she didn't cry over her loss for more than a week, and only then after visiting a friend in Midland, Texas.

Then she used up all the tissue in toilet paper in the house to wipe the tears from her face.

"I'm sure it looked like I was in a snowdrift," she says now.

The Singers' love story was like one out of a script. She met her husband in junior high school in Norman when she was 14, but "never liked him that much" at the time. Years later, they reconnected while he was studying medicine at the University of Oklahoma. They began

"There are no free lunches. You live in this country, you reap its benefits, you pay the price."

Jo Anne H. Singer, recalling the words of her late husband, U.S. Army Capt. Norman Singer, a doctor who died in Vietnam

LUIS SÁNCHEZ SATURNO
THE NEW MEXICAN

Jo Anne H. Singer and husband Norman Singer on their wedding day in 1964. COURTESY PHOTO

dating, and two months later, he asked her to marry him in the parking lot of a shopping center.

She was about to take a job as a physical education teacher in California, but called the school to say she got a better offer.

At the time of Norman's death, the Singers were close to celebrating five years of marriage. A lot of plans had been made: having children, traveling and living happily ever after once he returned from duty in Vietnam.

But terrible five words brought all that to an end.

When he went to Vietnam in September 1968, Jo Anne Singer wasn't happy about it because "I knew it was going to be a year tour, and we had babies to take care of." The prospect of her husband dying in a faraway land seemed impossible. He sent letters and cassette tapes in which he told her things were going well, though the last tape she received was interrupted by the sound of artillery fire.

He talked to her by phone twice, through a ham radio operator, so that with every sentence, they both had to end with "Over."

"How are you? Over."

"Fine. How are the kids? Over."

"They're well. I love you. Over."

"We talked as if we were driving a semi," she says with a laugh.

By May 1969, Norman had served eight months. Surely he could make four more and come home.

Those five words made her realize that wasn't going to happen.

"It was just like in the movies, like I was June Allyson and they came and told her that Dick Powell had been killed," she says, referring to popular movie stars of the day who were married in real life.

Only this was no movie, and there was no screenwriter to fashion a happy ending.

Jo Anne Singer never married again, although she said she came close twice in the years after her husband's death in what she calls "a close call" and "a narrow escape." Both her children became land developers — her son in Mexico and her daughter in Argentina.

As a surviving spouse of a veteran, she qualified for the G.I. Bill, which paid for her master's degree in physical education at what is now the University of Central Oklahoma. She was shocked to discover some people in college, upon finding out her husband had served in Vietnam, called him a "baby killer."

No, she would reply, that's not true. Capt. Singer often left the fortified base to go into the surrounding country to treat native Montagnards, an indigenous people living in Vietnam's Central Highlands.

Over the years, her sadness has given way to anger.

"I'm furious," she says, "furious at all the stupid reasons we go to war and stay at war and the loss of life of all these young men who became cannon fodder in those wars."

Her husband, she said, willingly went to serve and refused to look for a way to avoid the war.

At the time, he would tell her: "There are no free lunches. You live in this country, you reap its benefits, you pay the price."

Jo Anne Singer remembers those words. And five other words that brought the war to her front door 50 years ago.

THEIR WORDS · ART VARELA

'Mosquitoes, leeches ... poisonous snakes'

Right smack into the Southeast Asian monsoon season and with no expectation of clear weather any time soon, I arrived in Pleiku, South Vietnam. It was May 13, 1967.

Located in South Vietnam's Central Highlands, Pleiku was the base of the Army's 4th Infantry Division — my home for the next 12 months.

My unit's area of operation covered a large geographical expanse, from Pleiku's Camp Enari south to Ban Me Thuot, north to Dak To and Kon Tum Province, as well as the Ia Drang Valley, site of the infamous 1965 battle between units of the First Cavalry Division and the 66th North Vietnamese Army regiment.

Upon arrival in country, I was immediately challenged with Vietnam's extreme climate conditions. Temperatures in the high 90s and seemingly 100 percent humidity. Disembarking from the airplane, in addition to the extreme heat, I was met with a strong odor: a mixture of oil, human waste, a thousand cooking stoves and something else all at once. Some have described this as "a surreal and distorted mirage-like image on the far end of the runway dancing in the distance."

While on patrol conducting search-and-destroy missions, aside from continually looking over our shoulders for enemy sniper fire and land mines, we had to contend with ubiquitous swarms of mosquitoes, leeches that would tenaciously cling to one's skin and body organs, poisonous snakes, and filthy streams and rivers.

My first day in the field, I was bitten on the hand by a mosquito, resulting in extreme swelling. Our company medic's treatment and advice: "Get used to it."

Our primary diet consisted of C rations left over from the Korean War, delicacies such as canned spaghetti and meatballs, beef stew, and ham and lima beans. While conducting joint operations with South Vietnamese Army soldiers, we would exchange C rations for instant rice. A mixture of C rations, rice, Tabasco sauce, ketchup and canned green chile from home made for a nice goulash, resulting in a somewhat palatable meal.

The day's highlight for an infantryman in Vietnam was seeing a helicopter hovering over the landing zone containing a large orange mailbag — mail from home.

My friendship, solidarity and camaraderie among follow comrades in arms, while fighting and protecting our nation's freedom, will be forever cherished. Exposure to the horrors of war, half a world away from home, seemed like an eternity. Yet, in retrospect, my time in Vietnam was like a flash. Thanks to family prayers and my abiding strong faith in God, before I knew it, my term overseas was done. I boarded the "freedom bird" and in short order, was back in my beloved Pecos.

Art Varela served in Vietnam in 1967-68 with the Army's 4th Infantry Division. COURTESY PHOTO

THEIR WORDS · KEN STEWART

‘Wondered just what kind of man I had become’

An old Special Forces camp at Dak To on the Cambodian border had been a site for months of contact with the North Vietnamese Army in the monsoon mud. One of the first battles left a pile of body bags taller and longer than the C-130 airplane.

The 173rd Airborne Brigade took a beating, with hundreds dead and wounded. To recoup and take on the many required replacements, many units were sent to a town by the ocean called Tuy Hoa on the South China Sea. It was beautiful, with sand beaches and waves to frolic in. There were local women willing to give themselves to the multitude of soldiers for a paltry sum. We took off our rotting foul clothes and ran laughing into the ocean. It was fantastic, the salt water stinging and then healing a multitude of leech and insect bites and trench rot.

When I came out of the ocean to dry in the sun, I discovered my wallet was missing. There were many young local boys running around, and I grabbed the arm of one nearby and said, “Where is my wallet? Give me my wallet.” Whether they understood seemed to be irrelevant. We were large screaming madmen towering over scared young boys. Within a few minutes, another soldier came by and said, “Do you want your wallet? I’ll show you how to get your wallet.” He then grabbed the nearest boy, took him kicking and screaming over to the ocean and commenced to push him under the water and held him kicking and thrashing. He turned toward the other boys and said, “Give him his wallet.”

Now, I just spent months in frequent combat, horrible conditions, participating in human slaughter, but killing little boys was too much. I said, “Hey man, let him up. I hardly have any money in it.” He continued to hold a kid under the water and his thrashing became less vigorous. I was torn between saving the kid or appearing weak or losing face. Suddenly, my wallet appeared, thrown down with a slap on my clothes. The other soldier lifted the kid out of the water and not too gently put him on the beach sputtering and gasping.

I came to war to become a man in some primal sense. I stood on the beach thinking I had become a man, and wondered just what kind of man I had become.

Ken Stewart during his service in the Vietnam War.
COURTESY PHOTO

THEIR WORDS · KEN STEWART

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Ken Stewart during his service in the Vietnam War.
COURTESY PHOTO

THEIR WORDS • RAY GERE

‘Humor really is the best medicine for a broken heart’

I have learned that the pen is mightier than the sword. As my Army battalion’s orders clerk in Vietnam, my weapons of war were a standard typewriter and a mimeograph machine. Despite my training on various weapons and in many combat engineering skills like bridge building and land mine detection-removal, it was my knowledge of the QWERTY keyboard that proved to be most valuable to my battalion.

The typewriter-mimeograph combo was critical to the administration of the war. Whether in the comfort of a stateside base or in the middle of a jungle combat zone, every order had to be mass produced. We had no copy machines in those days, and carbon paper copies were impractical for the 20 to 30 copies that were required for each document. So, all original orders were typed on a blue mimeograph stencil that would print countless copies.

Ray Gere in the commanding officer’s office at the 27th Engineer Battalion (Combat) headquarters at Camp Eagle. COURTESY PHOTO

This vital communications combo allowed me to provide one of the greatest contributions to the well-being of my fellow soldiers: a Dear John Reply Form Letter (DJR-FL) with various and vicious possible responses. Dear John letters (DJL) were not a new phenomenon in Vietnam — the phrase is believed to have been coined by Americans during World War II to describe missives sent by women back home to their boyfriends and husbands serving in the military far away.

When one of my buddies asked me for help in composing a reply to his DJL, the idea of a form letter began to germinate. He was so upset by the news that he couldn’t decide whether to be angry or understanding. But he had his pride, and he wanted her to know how he felt. Though it was meant originally as a joke to make my friend laugh, the DJR-FL proved to be very popular with my comrades, with many being mailed to the unfaithful lovers.

Here’s a sample — just circle the appropriate word or phrase.

Dear Darling, (or) _____ (name), (or) Scumbag,

I just received your letter. (or) Gee, I haven’t heard from you in a while. (or) Are you there, you two-timing b---?

I am fine and I hope you are fine too. (or) reconsidering your decision to leave me. (or) suffering from the venereal disease your new boyfriend gave you.

I hope your new boyfriend makes you happy. (or) is really good enough for you. (or) dies of terminal crabs.

I stare at your picture on the wall all the time. (or) I’ll send your picture back to you in the next mail. (or) Your picture is now a target in our latrine.

Please write back and tell me you love me. (or) give my record collection to my mom, (or) DROP DEAD!!!

The actual letter was slightly longer and more brutal than the sample here, with more graphic and scatological touches. But it was also really cathartic, proving that humor really is the best medicine for a broken heart.

Vietnam veteran Herb Lotz's photos from the war have been in museums across the state and country. He was drafted but chose not to take advantage of being gay to get out of serving. 'I found that being gay in the Army in Vietnam was not a problem,' Lotz said of attitudes in the '60s. LUIS SÁNCHEZ SATURNO/THE NEW MEXICAN

HERB LOTZ

THROUGH HIS LENS

By Robert Nott
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Herb Lotz stared at the black-and-white photo one of his fellow soldiers took of him while he was on guard duty at Long Binh, Vietnam, in March 1968.

He was pretty new to the war and had not yet seen the death and destruction a war would inflict.

"I had not lost my innocence yet," he said, staring hard into the past.

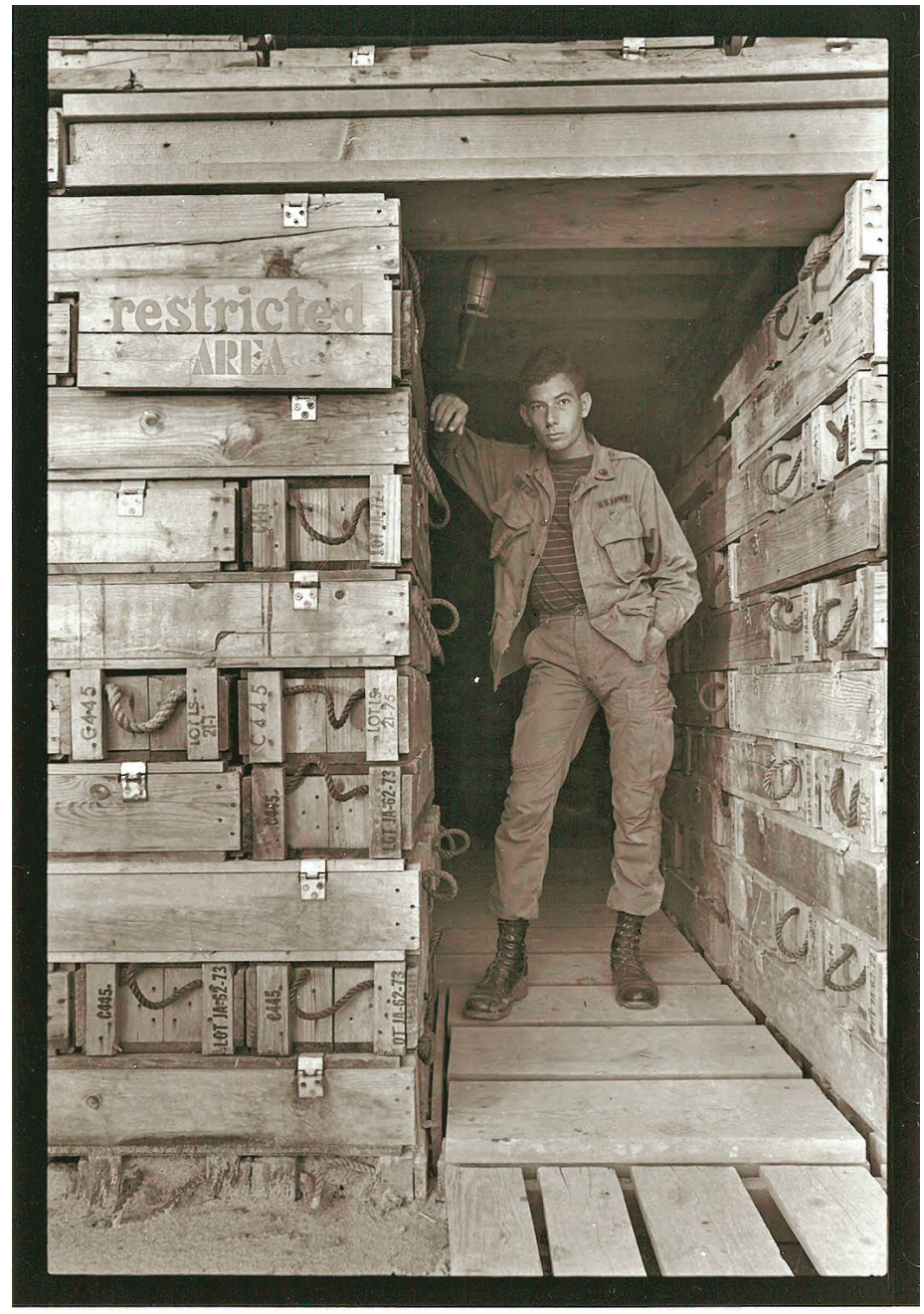
Lotz, whose photos have been displayed in a number of museums in New Mexico and around the country, served as a radio-teletype operator from March 1968 to March 1969 at Cu Chi, a place renowned for a nearby array of tunnels used by the Viet Cong. Trained as a radio operator, he says he often slept in his communications bunker, an M-14 rifle by his side, to transmit messages from the field to headquarters.

The Illinois native, 75, was raised in the small farming community of Matteson, about 30 miles south of Chicago. In 1964, he was accepted into the School of the Art Institute of Chicago to study painting and photography.

Three years later, while working and attending school, he was drafted because he dropped below the minimum number of college credits required to avoid the draft. Though he was gay, he chose not to use that as a way to avoid serving.

"I came out in the mid-1960s, but it wasn't printed on my forehead," he says. "I did have a partner, but we did not live together. I felt if you wore it too literally you would be harmed, or not succeed in your work. I found honesty the best way to go, but I'm not sure what kind of price I paid, if any."

Lotz took his camera with him to Vietnam — snapping photos of men coming in or going out to battle; of war-weary troops watching a Bob Hope USO show; of Thai singers who doubled as strippers; of angry mess-hall cooks; of smiling soldiers surrounded by pin-ups of naked women. He also photographed the damage done by enemy attacks on the base, which destroyed buildings and soldiers around him.



Herb Lotz while he was on guard duty at Long Binh, South Vietnam, in March 1968.

His pictures have gained plenty of attention through the years: His work has been shown at a New Mexico Museum of Art exhibition several years ago and was displayed at the Long Beach Museum of Art, the Albuquerque Museum and the Ontario College of Art and Design.

Lotz, who has lived in Santa Fe since January 1970, shortly after receiving an honorable discharge from the U.S. Army, spoke about some of his experiences and the photos he took during an interview in his downtown Santa Fe home.

Question: Had you thought about documenting the war before you got there?

Lotz: No. I was just gonna bring my camera and take photos. I was raised in a pacifist family. My parents were Republicans. My father was a Lutheran from Germany, and his family were pacifists who left Germany to avoid conscription. My dad didn't know what to say when I got drafted. He said, "I don't know how to help you. I have no experience with this." He was very sad about the whole thing.

Question: Speaking of sad, these soldiers standing around watching a USO show in your photo aren't laughing.

Lotz: They don't like look like they are laughing. They pulled them out of the field, called them back to base, let them watch this show — I think it was Bob Hope and Ann-Margret — and then sent them back out to fight.

Question: A lot of the men who you photographed look like prisoners or 14-year-olds who have learned to kill people.

IN COUNTRY

Memories of service in Vietnam

Herb Lotz's photographs from his time in country reflect the daily lives of those who served in Vietnam.

COURTESY PHOTOS

Lotz: They look kind of dead. But don't you have to do that? Don't you have to shut down something to survive?

Question: Did you ever want to photograph combat?

Lotz: I don't know that I would have wanted to. We were getting hit a lot with mortar. We had an airfield with planes and helicopters and we had a medical unit, so we were getting a lot of people brought in to have a leg or an arm taken off. They had an incinerating oven right next to my hooch [barracks] where they were burning body parts all the time, so the smell of burning flesh got seared into my psyche. If somebody came back hurt and they had to amputate a leg or an arm, what were they going to do with those body parts once they took them off? They burned them.

Question: A lot of Vietnam veterans talk of landing at their base there the first day and smelling the scent of burning feces in the air.

Lotz: I burned feces. They had 55-gallon drum containers that were underneath the seats in the outhouses. You would take a dump and it would go in there. Then you would drag them out and put gasoline or kerosene in and mix it and then we would burn it. The first thing that struck new soldiers was the smell of burning [expletive], that was true.

Question: Did you feel every day that you might die?

Lotz: That was always present. You know soldiers, it's just part of the deal. When we started to get hit and sirens went off and lights went on, you went into a bunker and waited for it to pass. And your adrenaline would get pumping — but not like you know when you are going to die.

I was in this situation once, where the base got hit, they came up from the tunnels and satchel-charged a lot of the Hueys [helicopters] with bombs. The Vietnamese had brought up bombs in satchels, bags, to detonate, and it turned into a real war on base camp. Everything turned red in the sky. I was in my hootch, I grabbed my rifle and stood by the window to shoot any Vietnamese who came by. That didn't happen, but it scared the [expletive] out of me. I thought I wasn't going to make it.

[He points to a photo of a fellow soldier] This guy here, we met on an R&R [rest and recuperation break] and we spent a week together. We had a relationship. I found that being gay in the Army in Vietnam was not a problem. It was not something that you had to hide. You also didn't wear it on your forehead. The guys I was with, soldiers I hung out with knew who I was. This was the 1960s and there was acceptance.

Question: What do you think your photographs say today?

Lotz: I think they remind people of the loss of innocence in war. You see what these young men looked like when they went in and you see what they looked like when they came out. They're really about a loss of innocence.

Question: How do you look back at the war now, some 50 years later?

Lotz: It seems to me that it was such a waste of humanity and money. I was pretty anti-war before then, but we had the choice — you were drafted, so did you go live in another country? I had a friend who went to Canada. I consulted a friend of mine whose husband had been in the Second World War. He told me, "They are going to train you to be a soldier. Pay attention to how they train you and you will be a good soldier." And I paid attention to what they taught me, and I think I was a good soldier.

THEIR WORDS · BOB WERNER

‘Validation that justice could still prevail during times of war’

Fresh out of law school and into the Army, I found myself in Vietnam with a copy of the Uniform Code of Military Justice under one arm, an M-16 slung over my shoulder and an opportunity to see the incongruities and pathos later reflected in the 1970 film *M*A*S*H*. As my division’s defense counsel, I was about to face my toughest challenge yet.

In 1967, in the soggy jungle near the Laos border, Pfc. Robert E. Strouse of the 25th Infantry Division, who had adopted a dog, was brought before a court-martial on three charges: (1) behaving with disrespect toward Maj. Robert Lanphere by being belligerent and contemptuous and saying to him, “I am not leaving the area until the Vietnamese treat my dog.”; (2) lifting his M-16 rifle against Lt. Edwin Cravey and pulling the trigger; (3) threatening Lanphere with, “If that dog dies and I am not in jail, I will shoot you.”

After the standard yearlong tour in Vietnam, Strouse volunteered for a six-month extension. He had routinely seen close combat, had been injured twice, lost a close friend in combat and was considered an exemplary soldier by all his superiors. Strouse’s second injury resulted in leave for him.

His leave completed, he returned to his unit and reunited with his adopted dog, Vic. On a day pass, Strouse left Vic with others and crossed the street to a bar for beers with a friend. Later, upon seeing Strouse leaving the bar, Vic ran for him but was hit by a truck, breaking his leg. Strouse took Vic to a Vietnamese dispensary, where a medic agreed to treat Vic.

A meddling U.S. Army major who, a witness said later, was “quite drunk,” interceded. “Get the hell out of here,” he yelled. “This is no [expletive] dog hospital.”

The major ordered Strouse to the unit’s Tactical Ops Center. There, a lieutenant in charge unloaded Strouse’s M-16, took his ammo magazines, and returned the unloaded rifle to Strouse, who went outside and fell asleep as the major and the lieutenant talked. Strouse, startled from sleep when the lieutenant called his name, grabbed his unloaded rifle and was turning a corner of a sandbagged passageway when he accidentally ran into the lieutenant. The lieutenant snatched the rifle, hit Strouse across the face three times and left him bleeding on the ground. He was transferred to the stockade.

Three months later, I was defending Strouse before a panel of combat-toughened officers. I pinpointed disputed facts, legal details concerning intent and the credibility and demeanor of witnesses. Multiple officers and other soldiers who had fought beside Strouse testified to his character — he was the “best soldier that I have ever known.” An Army psychiatrist noted Strouse’s loss of his friend in combat, the loss of his dog and the stress of combat.

Strouse was cleared on all three counts. It was a lesson for all about the absurdities of life in a war zone, but validation that justice could still prevail during times of war.

Bob Werner served in the Army in Vietnam as his division’s defense counsel. He recalls a time when he defended a soldier who got into trouble while trying to care for his adopted dog.

COURTESY PHOTO

Pete Thompson with a gunship he flew at a place called LZ English, the home of the 173rd Airborne Brigade.

COURTESY PHOTO

THEIR WORDS · PETE THOMPSON

‘I went outside, captured a bullfrog and put it in the saxophone’

I was a helicopter pilot in Vietnam. It was July 17, 1971, at Lane Army Airfield at An Son, Vietnam, 61st Assault Helicopter Company, 1LT Pete Thompson, call sign Starblazer 15, gunship platoon. All is calm for a band at the O (Officers) Club with no standby tonight. Let the good times roll.

On the way to the O Club, being a novice naturalist, I noticed a large number of bullfrogs leaping about, looking for love or avoiding it — either way, doing what bullfrogs do at night.

I went into the O Club and saw the band had set up their instruments on stage in stands. They were from another country in the region, and I believe their knowledge of English was limited save for the current pop tunes of the day. The saxophone was sitting in a stand with the large opening called the bell just waiting to be played or played with. I went outside, captured a bullfrog and put it in the saxophone without anybody noticing.

The band came on stage and most eyes turned to them ready to hear real music of our day. The first tune was Three Dog Night’s “Joy to the World,” which starts with, “Jeremiah was a bullfrog, was a friend of mine, I never understood a word he said but I helped him drink his wine ...”

Suddenly all eyes were on the sax player and everybody was laughing, pointing at the band. The bullfrog had crawled up to the lip of the bell and was looking dazed at all the noise. The sax player looked at his horn and dumped the bullfrog out onto the stage. I immediately escorted it outside with an honorary Air Medal. Went back and enjoyed the evening.

THEIR WORDS · MARK FRENCH

‘If the night went silent, you knew the enemy was nearby’

I flew from Cam Rahn Bay to Cu Chi (25th Infantry Division) Dec. 15, 1969 on a C-130 cargo plane. After dropping off other “newfers” along the way at their new homes away from home, we saw the airstrip but wondered why the airstrip was lined with officers, enlisted men, reporters, photographers — and an Army band.

We landed and people rushed to our plane, only to see two draftees in new Army fatigues carrying rucksacks. There were some words to the effect that we needed to get the heck out of there. You see, our aircraft was not to land until after Bob Hope and his troupe landed. Apparently, our pilot hadn’t gotten the word. ... Never did see Bob Hope.

The air was unbelievably hot and humid. The smell from GIs burning crap at the edges of the base was intensely foul. The heat, humidity and smells took away your breath! Gil and I went to our assigned hooch. We were the only “new guys” there. Some platoons who had been out in the bush or the rice paddies were arriving back to base. They were dirty, talked little and had looks on their faces like I had not seen before. Little did I know that in 11 months and 17 days, I would be wearing a very similar look.

First night in country was to be a training of sorts, with Gil and I going out to the Ho Bo Woods with a small platoon of troops who were to be going home soon. The Ho Bo Woods was supposed to be a “safe area” for such exercises, but we ran into six Viet Cong soldiers wandering around. To our amazement, the “short-timers” let them go. Gil and I guessed our guys didn’t want to start anything that might get them wounded or worse with just days left in country. That night did cause Gil and I to experience the first of many “butt puckers” while in Vietnam!

Gil, who had played football for Louisiana State University before getting drafted, was given an M-60 to carry, and I was handed an M-79 grenade launcher, though I had only shot it two or three times in earlier training. Within a week, we began to look and act like our Charlie Company brothers.

During the next few months, Gil and I learned to deal with temperatures in excess of 105 degrees, humidity of 100 percent, getting soaked from sweat, slogging through water in the rice paddies and other “rainy season” experiences. Many nights were spent trying to sleep in rice paddies, trying not to make a sound and listening to the sounds of the night, hoping the Viet Cong weren’t lurking nearby.

On many occasions, the Viet Cong knew exactly where we were and spoiled our evenings. If the night went silent, you knew the enemy was nearby.

Unlike some of our brothers, Gil and I came home alive. However, the experience left me with both physical and emotional wounds that I carry to this day. But I still consider it an honor to having served and defended my country. God Bless America!

Mark French during his service in the Vietnam War. COURTESY PHOTOS

Leroy Sanchez served as a Naval reservist during the Vietnam War. He grew up in Belen and took photos for *Stars and Stripes*, including wounded Marines being brought into a hospital for treatment. COURTESY PHOTO

THEIR WORDS · LEROY SANCHEZ

‘I am so thankful that I was able to return home safely’

In the summer of Woodstock, I was in Vietnam. On June 20, 1969, I flew from California to Da Nang, Vietnam, for a one-year tour of duty as a U.S. Naval Reservist. I had been concerned about getting drafted, so about a year before, I had enlisted in the Naval Reserve. When I landed at midnight in Da Nang, dressed in my Navy “whites,” I was amazed to see the flares shooting up before me while I took in the sounds and smells of a war zone.

In Da Nang, I was stationed at Camp Tien Sha as photographer’s mate in the camp’s Public Affairs Division. In this capacity, I was sent on various assignments and took photos for *Stars and Stripes* newspaper. I had one particular assignment that was especially difficult. I had to photograph wounded Marines coming off helicopters to the Da Nang hospital, their clothes being torn off in preparation for surgery and hospitalization and their faces masks of suffering and trauma. It took a long time to get those images out of my head.

I had only been “in country” four days when I saw one of my cousins, Alfred Padilla from Belen, who was a Marine. He was getting ready to go home the next day, and I had 361 days more to serve active duty! I saw four more Belen friends in different branches of the military that year, and this was amazing because Belen, where I grew up until high school, had a population of only 7,000.

Halfway through my tour of duty, I flew to meet my wife in Hawaii for R&R (rest and recuperation) for a week. While I was in Vietnam, she wrote to me every day, and those letters sustained me during this time. A month after I had returned to my base, I lost a California friend who was an officer and a helicopter pilot in a crash at an air base.

Needless to say, my happiest day was on June 2, 1970, when I was getting ready to leave back to the States. However, there was a small but important glitch as I was getting ready to board a midnight plane home. I was told that I needed another shot. Panic set in as I ran around the base looking for a medic to give me this shot! Well, I found one and boarded my plane home, arriving four days before my wife’s college graduation. Dressed in civilian clothes, as many of the military did then due to the war’s unpopularity, I felt like kissing the ground.

I am so thankful that I was able to return home safely, but I am also very aware every day that more than 58,000 Americans did not get to return home to their loved ones. I have mixed feelings about the Vietnam War, but I honor those who served.

J. David Duran served in the Marines during the Vietnam War. COURTESY PHOTO

THEIR WORDS • J. DAVID DURAN

‘This for a guy who had never been out of New Mexico’

I grew up in Santa Fe. When I graduated from St. Michael’s High School in 1964, I didn’t know anything about the Vietnam conflict. But by the spring of the following year, 1965, I was making a beach landing with fellow Marines in Chu Lai, South Vietnam. In a short period of time, I had joined the Marines, completed basic training in San Diego and traveled on Navy ships to Hawaii, Okinawa and then Vietnam.

This for a guy who had never been out of New Mexico.

I went to St. Michael’s High School on a scholarship from Our Lady of Guadalupe Junior High. I had to maintain a B average to continue with the scholarship the next two years. In high school, I knew I wanted to go to college but realized I didn’t have the means to go. I was in Marine boot camp by June 1964.

From boot camp, I received an MOS (Military Occupation Specialty) of a field radio operator. I got orders for two years with the Marine Air Wing in Oahu, Hawaii. However, four months later, we boarded a Navy ship and were told we were going to California for additional combat training. The ship instead headed toward Okinawa, Japan, to replace Marines headed to Vietnam. Two weeks later, we became the Marines headed to Vietnam.

We made a beach landing in the Chu Lai area off a large ship that was flat-bottomed and opened up in the front when it touched land. For several months, we slept in the tents we carried on our backs and ate canned C rations. Later, larger tents were constructed and the food improved. It is interesting to note that each box of C rations (we got three per day) contained four cigarettes. My least favorite meal was ham and lima beans!

My job was to maintain radio contact with the infantry forward observers and relay information to command when artillery support was needed. The forward observers called in “fire missions” and provided specific location information where they wanted the artillery shells to land. The big howitzers were fired day and night. Our night lights were candles, and it was common to have them snuffed out by the impact of the howitzers going off. The artillery was portable, and we went on missions to provide support in other nearby areas.

My tour of duty in Vietnam ended 13 months later. I volunteered to serve and did what my government asked me to do to the best of my ability. Our goal was to assist the South Vietnamese in their war against the North Vietnamese. In the end, South Vietnam was taken over by North Vietnam. I support the idea that South Vietnam today is very much like the U.S. wanted it to be, and it was made possible because of our intervention.

THEIR WORDS • ALVIN BACA

‘The cost of war may take a lot of time to bear out’

The term “war” takes on a different meaning when you receive a letter of induction from your local draft board, as I did in the summer of 1967. That meant you’ll be subjected to duty in an area where bullets and explosives are directed right at you. I had just completed my third year of college, and time had run out for the deferment, so my time for service was due.

I ended up agreeing to be assigned to the Army Security Agency, which required a top-secret security clearance and a four-year service commitment. My recruiter was almost certain that I would end up being assigned to something in military finance because of my college schooling.

All military service starts with basic training, which has a fundamental purpose: “to take the civilian out of you.” Toward the end of basic training, I received orders for training to become a radio operator using Morse code. Most soldiers assigned to the Morse schooling hated it, and many opted out to be assigned to other occupations where promotion was much slower and could have involved more risk. The schooling was long and intense.

My first duty assignment was to Thailand, where I learned about the complexity of the Vietnam conflict. I read quite a bit about the history of China and developed an appreciation for the “capacity of this sleeping giant to awaken.” Following my duty assignment to Thailand, I had a short assignment in the U.S. in the Washington, D.C., area.

My next duty assignment was Vietnam, near the city of Hue and attached to the 101st Airborne Division. My unit was a radio research station that was also a target of sporadic enemy fire from mortars, rockets and other irritating explosives. I was assigned to lead our company bunker’s .50-caliber machine gun during alerts. During my entire year in Vietnam, the machine gun was “on order,” and it arrived long after my departure from duty. Our duty also included sharing of guard chores and spiffing up the buildings and grounds for some hotshot from the Pentagon. This was expected after working your 12-hour shift of listening to that awful radio stuff (for military intelligence).

Luckily, most soldiers in our unit made it home without serious battle scars. Some of us have learned that the cost of war may take a lot of time to bear out. The incidence of diabetes, cardiac disorders and post-traumatic stress disorder are examples of the delayed reaction to the scars of war.

Decades after serving a military tour, an individual cannot help but ask, “Was it worth it?”

Alvin Baca was an Army radio operator during the Vietnam War. COURTESY PHOTO

Charles B. Zobac served in a military intelligence unit in Vietnam. COURTESY PHOTO

THEIR WORDS • CHARLES B. ZOBAC

‘I helped our medic deliver the baby, and it turned out fine’

The military intelligence detachment that I was part of was tasked with creating and analyzing field intel for operations in our areas of operation. In the late summer of ’67, I was attached to an A-team north of An Khe in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. Many of our local forces were indigenous Montagnards, who are very loyal to American forces and highly thought of by most Special Forces troops.

There was a small village near our camp, and we did inspection and investigation of the local villages to aid and assist them when possible.

Our medic and our team leaders thought that we had the possibility of being of exceptional use to these people if we could inoculate the village for a dangerous disease that was virtually unheard of in the United States — bubonic plague. I was part of the team that went to the village and helped give out the shots and candy to the women and children and some of the men. It took most of a day to explain, inject and satisfy the village elders that we were helping the tribe and not hurting them or giving them bad medicine. It was quite an experience, trying to explain germs and needles and good stuff versus bad stuff to these people, but we did it. When we were finished, we had a big meal and passed out what candy we had to the women and children.

Another incident occurred with another team while we were attached to the coastal town of Qui Nhon. It was in October of ’67, during monsoon weather, when flying was irregular even in helicopters because of very low ceilings — fog and mountains. We had another group of Montagnards who provided security for the A-team camp. Some of the local native troops had their families with them, and one teen girl was pregnant and about to have a baby. This was not that unusual, but there was a complication with the delivery.

Our medic had dealt with these problems before and was skilled in the OB-GYN section, but he needed some assistance. So, he came into the team hut and asked if I would assist him. It turned out that the baby was a breech birth situation, and if we could have, we would have taken her and her partner to the nearest field hospital in Qui Nhon. But we could not get a medevac chopper in because of weather and visible flight conditions. So, I helped our medic deliver the baby, and it turned out fine for all parties.

The young girl gave birth to a baby boy, and the parents were delighted that they did not have to take a helicopter ride.

THEIR WORDS • HERB THOMAS

‘A green rookie in a combat zone’

I graduated from Yale in 1965, and I served in Vietnam as an officer in the 4th Infantry Division. But I was never in combat. I was assigned to a desk job, and because I didn’t seek to become a combat leader, I stayed in desk jobs.

After losing a student deferment, I received a draft notice. To have some say in my future, possibly serving in Germany instead of Vietnam, I volunteered for Officer Candidate School at Fort Knox in Kentucky. I survived basic training and OCS and was commissioned a second lieutenant in August 1967. Although bright academically, I was less adept at practical soldiering. In basic training, for example, I barely passed rifle marksmanship.

Instead of Germany, I stayed at Fort Knox. Aware that I was well educated, my bosses put me in charge of a 1,600-man brigade’s legal office, even though I hadn’t studied law. After receiving orders for Vietnam, I traveled to Pleiku in the Central Highlands in early August 1968 and joined the 4th Infantry Division.

Although most of my OCS classmates went to mechanized infantry units, I was assigned to a small office that scheduled United Service Organizations productions for the division. The head of the USO office was a Harvard man. Was someone playing games putting Yale and Harvard together? I couldn’t stand that office. Within a week, I happened to meet the head of the division’s military history detachment, who was looking for an assistant. He arranged to have me transferred.

The lieutenant who was my predecessor had decided the job was too safe, and that duty required him to go to the field as a platoon leader.

My work in the following months was interesting, but it wasn’t combat. I was soon sent to the southern Central Highlands to serve in a brigade command post, on the night shift, posting the maps and preparing reports for division headquarters.

One night in September 1968, a U.S. infantry company near the Cambodian border detected a North Vietnamese Army regiment passing perilously nearby, through triple-canopy forest. They called in all available artillery fire, inflicting heavy but uncounted casualties on the enemy regiment. The next morning, acting in my capacity as a military historian, I took a helicopter to the company’s encampment and tape-recorded an interview with the company commander and a young sergeant from Michigan who had adjusted fire on the North Vietnamese Army.

After an hour, the helicopter came back. I remember that I misplaced something, eating up an extra 10 seconds before

Herb Thomas in April 1969 at 4th Infantry Division Headquarters, about 10 miles south of Pleiku in Vietnam’s Central Highlands. Thomas said the buildings in the background were used by intelligence units who kept to themselves. COURTESY PHOTO

takeoff. The NVA might have zeroed in on us, but we got away without incident. In those few seconds I experienced how foolish it felt to be a green rookie in a combat zone.

A day later, at the operations center, we received word that the North Vietnamese had come looking for the American infantry company. There had been a firefight, and the young sergeant whom I had met had been killed.

JOHN ROMERO

FROM TAOS PUEBLO TO THE HO CHI MINH TRAIL

Vietnam veteran John Romero of Taos Pueblo is working to honor the sacrifice made by Native Americans in military conflicts.

LUIS SÁNCHEZ SATURNO
THE NEW MEXICAN

By Robert Nott
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TAOS

Sam Martinez taught his grandson, John Romero, well.

Martinez wanted the boy to learn how to survive in the wilderness, so he often took him into the mountains surrounding Taos to hike, hunt, camp and learn how to use the sun and moon to find his way home.

"He taught me how to deal with different environments, how to make and follow trails," says Romero, who served in the U.S. Army from 1968-72 and now oversees veterans issues for Taos Pueblo.

That talent came in handy when an Army officer appointed Romero as point man for combat patrols near the Ho Chi Minh trail in the Central Highlands region of South Vietnam.

The unit's job: Find the North Vietnamese forces and kill them.

It wasn't easy. There was nothing easy there.

The Viet Cong knew how and where to hide. Romero, now 72, lost track of the days, weeks and months as he led his unit through rain-soaked jungles and rice paddies. He avoided leading his men on well-worn trails where ambushes and booby traps were likely. Instead, he made his own paths, which worked fine until a new lieutenant, fresh from West Point, ordered a six-man patrol led by Romero to take an established trail that pointed to danger.

About 200 yards in, the enemy struck. Everyone was hit, and some — including the lieutenant, whose name is lost to history as far as Romero is concerned — died.

Romero, who still bears a scar over his left eye where one bullet struck him, crawled to a wounded fellow soldier who also had a bullet wound to the head. It was his best friend, a man named Daniel Stevens.

"I held him," Romero recalls. "He couldn't talk. He was trying to talk with his eyes. They were saying 'Help me.' I couldn't. He died in my arms. To this day I cannot forget the look in those eyes."

Romero passed out, and when he awoke, he was in a field hospital. The next time he came to, he was in a military hospital in Hawaii. He never returned to Vietnam, serving out his four-year tour at Fort Hood, Texas.

By the time Romero returned to New Mexico, he had seen a lot for a man of 25. It had been a whirlwind for a kid from Taos Pueblo, snagged by the draft in the summer of 1968.

Looking back, Romero says he wasn't frightened by the prospect of combat — and in some ways, he has his

Native roots to thank. He recalls his grandfather, the man who'd led him through the mountains near Taos, blessing him by making a protective pouch out of buckskin with tribal medicine tucked inside.

"Never take it off," Martinez told his grandson. "When it's time for you to come back, you're not going to have it anymore. It's gonna stay in Vietnam."

And it did: Romero says he lost the pouch somewhere between being wounded and recovering in the hospital in Hawaii.

He remembers being the only Native American in his unit. Some of the other soldiers — "Hillbilly types raised in the hills," he says — nicknamed him "Chief," a term he did not mind. Nor did he take offense when he was ordered to be point man because, as his commander told him, he was Native American.

Romero says he thinks his commanding officer truly believed he would be the best man for the job. And in some ways, the kid from Taos had a bond with those from the hills and backwaters of America's other rural areas: They were good fighting men who knew, as he did, how to hunt, track and shoot.

Prayer kept him alive, he says, "Not only for me, but for everybody, asking that the Great Spirit protect us."

He didn't like learning how to kill. After the first death he caused, Romero recalls thinking: Why are we killing each other?

During his time there, Romero says he learned to respect the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong as warriors. They knew how to move, how to hide, how to kill. He never came to hate them as some would.

"I never had that feeling," he says. "They were doing the same thing we were doing — trying to survive."

He liked the South Vietnamese people he was fighting to protect and still recalls an old man in one of the villages who used his hands to communicate with Romero.

"He pointed at me, he pointed at himself, and I guess he was trying to tell me we were the same color," Romero says with a laugh. "All the other guys in the unit were white!"

During his last visit to the village, Romero gave that man a gift of a knife his brother had sent him from New Mexico.

Not everything that came from the war was disastrous; Romero says it gave him a life's purpose. After watching children whose lives would be torn apart by the war in those Vietnamese villages, Romero vowed to help kids when he returned home. And he did.

With his wife, Paulita Mirabal, Romero started a family, and he worked as a student living adviser at Santa Fe Indian School. After 16 years, the couple moved back to Taos Pueblo. For seven years, he served as the Indian education director for Taos Municipal Schools until his physical, emotional and psychological war wounds opened up again in the form of nightmares and flashbacks.

Talking about it all with other war veterans helps, he says. So does working to honor the sacrifice made by Native Americans in military conflicts. Toward that end, he helped spearhead a financial campaign to build a monument honoring Taos Pueblo veterans. The granite stone memorials include names of past and present Taos Pueblo veterans from all wars, with room to add more who serve in the future.

Romero says that as a Native American — one of an estimated 42,000 who served in Vietnam — he doesn't question his involvement in the conflict.

"Some people said they didn't know why we were there," he says. "I knew. This is my country, this is my people. Native Americans were here first. Whenever we are threatened by anybody, we go and we fight and protect our people and our homeland.

"That's what I did."

Vietnam veteran John Romero of Taos Pueblo wears his Purple Heart. 'Native Americans were here first,' he said. 'Whenever we are threatened by anybody, we go and we fight and protect our people and our homeland. That's what I did.'

LUIS SÁNCHEZ SATURNO
THE NEW MEXICAN

THEIR WORDS • ANASTASIA KURILICH

‘My beloved daddy was not coming home’

June 1968.

I was in second grade. Tomorrow would be the last day of school. My teacher, Mrs. Mohr, was warm and kind with soft eyes. Suddenly, I was sent to the principal’s office, where our family friend, Mrs. Gagliardo, told me we were going to pick up my 4-year-old sister from preschool and she would then take us home early.

She drove us home in silence. I held hands with my baby sister trying to nurture her, feeling confused and wondering why our older sister wasn’t also with us. Upon arrival at our home, we noticed the car of the local minister. Upon entering the house, our mom greeted us and asked us to meet her in our shared bedroom. I felt dread and was terribly afraid. We went into the bedroom and sat on the bed. Our mom sat next to us and simply said one sentence, “Do you girls remember when we talked about the possibility that your daddy may not come home from the war?”

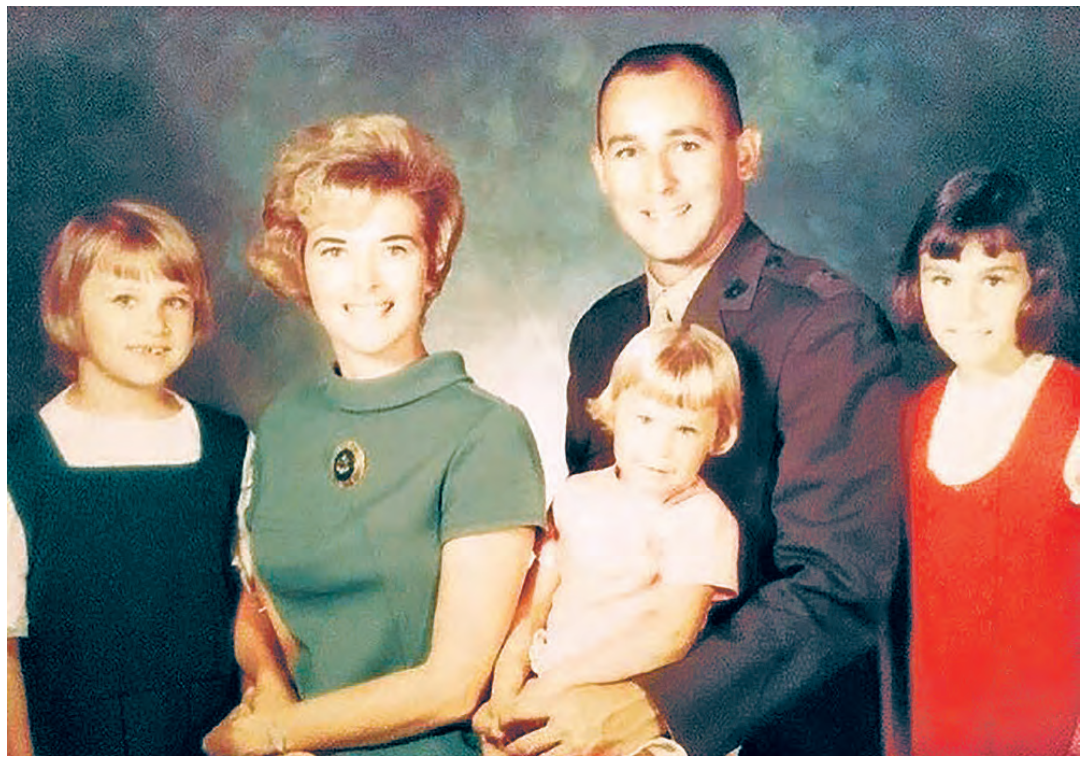
Bam — as if a nuclear explosion went off, my entire life just came to a crashing halt. My beloved daddy was not coming home. Daddy was dead. A tsunami of tears and screams was building when mom asked us to “pretend as if nothing was wrong” as relatives who hadn’t heard the news were on the way over to our home.

I wanted to be with my daddy, I wanted nothing to do with this world if my daddy wasn’t going to be living in it. I prayed God would take me, too.

The florist delivered a floral arrangement that day from Mrs. Mohr, pink roses in a white vase. My mom suggested I go to school the last day and bring a picture of daddy for “show and tell.” I was so shy that I was never able to speak up in class normally, much less now that both my heart and soul had shattered. Being a good girl, I did as Mother suggested. At show and tell, Mrs. Mohr, understanding my inability to speak, held up daddy’s picture and began telling the class how he was a hero, but soon, tears were streaming down her cheeks.

The students had never seen our teacher cry, so some of them started giggling. I realized these classmates, whom I recited the Pledge of Allegiance with every morning, would never understand the words “with liberty and justice for all” as I did. Those words would never tumble out of my mouth the same ever again. They looked at Mrs. Mohr in wide-eyed innocence, while I had suddenly and totally lost all childhood innocence the day before.

I sat at my desk, realizing that all my classmates were still children, 7 years of age, while I was now an “adult” in a young body. Childhood was over for me. While they looked forward to summer picnics, water parks, outings to the beach, we would wait for our beloved daddy’s flag-draped coffin to return from a faraway land called Vietnam.



The Kurilich family, from left: Anastasia, Barbara, Jill, Robert and Kym in September 1967, shortly before Robert Kurilich’s second tour. He died while serving in Vietnam in June 1968.

COURTESY PHOTOS

“I sat at my desk, realizing that all my classmates were still children, 7 years of age, while I was now an ‘adult’ in a young body. Childhood was over for me.” **Anastasia Kurilich**

Vince Ciotti served in Army intelligence during the Vietnam War. COURTESY PHOTO

THEIR WORDS • VINCE CIOTTI

‘The enemy that we hated so much were actually fellow humans just like us’

I was stationed in Saigon at the MACV (Military Assistance Command Vietnam) headquarters, working for that oxymoron “Army intelligence” in 1967-68. Our job was to study various sources of enemy information and try to figure out what the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army troops were up to so we could write reports to our commanders.

Our most common sources of information were translated documents found on the bodies of killed or wounded enemy troops and interrogation reports from captured prisoners. The latter were not worth very much, as prisoners were usually interrogated so harshly they ended up saying whatever they thought we wanted to hear.

However, captured documents were very informative as the Viet Cong and NVA officers were extremely thorough in documenting all their facts and figures for their communist superiors. Lists of every soldier in their ranks, all the weapons they possessed, rounds of ammo, organization charts of what companies reported to what battalions, etc. This gave us a pretty good idea of who we were facing in each province of South Vietnam for the intelligence reports we prepared for our troops on a periodic basis.

One of the most moving documents I ever read was the diary of an NVA soldier who traveled down the Ho Chi Minh trail on foot through Laos and into South Vietnam. He wrote entries every night into his diary in the form of letters to his beloved wife who he left in a village somewhere in North Vietnam.

There wasn’t any valuable military information, just the day-to-day experiences he went through, having to walk 10-20 miles every day in the torrid jungle heat, battling mosquitoes and snakes, the terror of having to run for cover when U.S. planes started bombing the trail, the rotten food they were forced to eat, nasty commanding officers, etc.

It was the human and emotional story of the diary that moved me so much: This was a fellow human suffering through terrible conditions living in the jungle and struggling to survive to hopefully see his wife again someday. And unlike we U.S. troops who had a one-year tour of duty before we returned home, the poor NVA soldiers were in the war for life — no chance of ever returning until they won (or lost) the war. It made me realize the enemy that we hated so much were actually fellow humans just like us, who loved their country and were fighting for it just like we were.

Makes one sad to realize how we humans have persisted in wars and conflicts over thousands of years, with each side hating the other, while in fact each side felt the same pain and suffering. Will we ever learn?

THEIR WORDS • DARWIN LUDI

‘I became the education petty officer of my company’

Darwin Ludi in 1969. COURTESY PHOTO

I served in the U.S. Navy from November 1968 until September 1972. After graduating from New Mexico Highlands University in 1968, I accepted a hospital internship at Penrose Hospital in Colorado Springs, Colo. ... I came home to Las Vegas, N.M., to find a letter telling me I had to report for induction into the Army. I did not want to enter the Army, so I visited with the U.S. Navy recruiter in Las Vegas. The Navy accepted me, and after leaving boot camp in San Diego, I was assigned to Navy Hospital Corpsmen School in San Diego. The training lasted 12 weeks, and I became the education petty officer of my company because of my biology degree. My responsibility was to tutor individuals who needed assistance.

Upon completing training, our company had to report to Camp Pendleton for advanced training before possibly going on to Vietnam. ... My background at Highlands University provided me with the knowledge to be a medical laboratory technologist with further training.

... I had to report to Camp Pendleton Naval Hospital, where I was in charge of the hematology and blood bank. Every week, we drew units of blood that were to go to Vietnam to support the Marines who were wounded. I never received orders to Vietnam but was asked to be part of the support system that provided assistance to those serving. ... I left Camp Pendleton and returned to Las Vegas, N.M., where I started to work on a master’s degree at Highlands University. ...

Vietnam veteran David Grant Noble later became an anti-war activist. "The more I learned about the people [of Vietnam], their culture and society and the war, the more I questioned the wisdom of American involvement," Noble said.

LUIS SÁNCHEZ SATURNO/THE NEW MEXICAN

DAVID GRANT NOBLE

FROM SOLDIER TO ACTIVIST

David Grant Noble did not mince words when it came to telling off former President Richard Nixon.

"I consider you to be a national disgrace," Noble wrote in a letter to Nixon on May 4, 1970, following news that the president had authorized an expansion of the Vietnam War into neighboring Cambodia.

Noble wanted Nixon to understand he wasn't a weird, counterculture "bum," as was sometimes the tag for those who protested the war in Vietnam.

"I am an ex-serviceman, a Vietnam vet with an honorable discharge," Noble wrote.

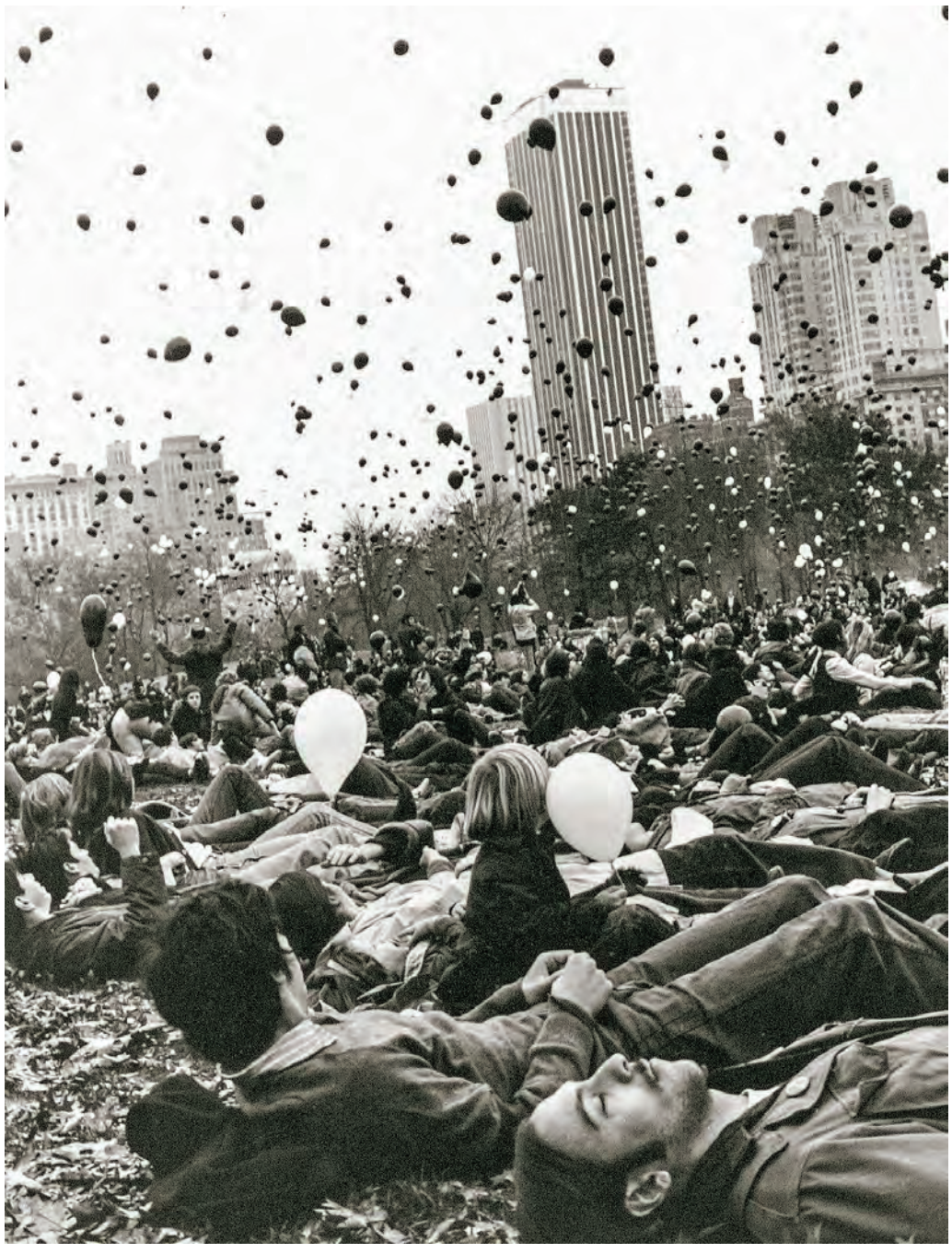
Noble's transformation from military intelligence officer, on the ground in Vietnam long before it became crushing nightly news, to angry ex-serviceman determined to stop the war, is a one-man snapshot of America's experience in Southeast Asia.

Noble says he served his country with the best of intentions only to be disillusioned by the hypocrisy and, perhaps, stupidity of those who called the shots.

"Going in, I had been told that we were supporting a struggling democracy opposed to communism in North Vietnam," Noble says now, almost 50 years after writing the president. "The more I learned about the people, their culture and society and the war, the more I questioned the wisdom of American involvement."

Noble, now 80, enlisted in the U.S. Army in September 1961 at the age of 21. His college degree — French — made him valuable in a nation with a long history as a colony of France, and he served as an interpreter as American advisers began training the South Vietnamese forces to deal with an insurgent uprising.

"I had never heard of Vietnam before that," says Noble, who was in South Vietnam in 1962 and '63. "I mean, maybe I had heard of the name, but I didn't know



David Grant Noble provided this photo of an anti-war rally he attended.

Noble, right, during his service in Vietnam, where he served as an undercover counter-intelligence officer in the Central Highlands region around the city of Pleiku.

COURTESY PHOTOS

where it was. What was happening over there was put in the back pages of newspapers, if it was covered at all."

He was an undercover counterintelligence officer whose job was to write up reports about the tribes, culture and geography of the Central Highlands region around the city of Pleiku. He discovered the staff there did not include anyone who had any real experience in the area.

"A lot of the stuff I put in reports is stuff you could have found in a good French encyclopedia," he says.

He soon began to understand that much of what he was doing was an exercise in absurdity.

"How can you tell if someone is a Viet Cong?" he recalls asking his commanding officer.

"That's easy," was the reply. "They look just like a Vietnamese."

Noble returned to the U.S., finishing his tour at an Army base in New York state. Shortly thereafter, he took a job teaching French to private school students while also working as a reporter for a weekly newspaper headquartered on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. His main job was to cover the ever-growing anti-war movement.

He lost his objectivity when, during the October 1967 Veterans for Peace March on the Pentagon, he joined the protesters.

"I became convinced the war was bad, so I joined the rally," he says.

By then, the war was at full volume, and questions abounded about its wisdom. More U.S. soldiers were coming home wounded; thousands weren't coming home at all.

He recalls a moment from the Veterans for Peace March, which ended with the arrest of hundreds of protesters and some injuries from clashes with military police. When the throng of some 70,000-plus marchers encountered a line of armed soldiers in front of the Pentagon, one demonstrator managed to pass through the gauntlet and speak to a military officer behind the line.

"And then everyone walked through," Noble says. "It was a moving thing to witness — peaceful leadership and courage."

After that, Noble actively worked as what he calls "a pro-peace activist" well into 1970, slowly coming to grips with his past as a former soldier serving in Vietnam.

"I was in the military; I was a patriot. You don't question orders — you just do it," he says. "And during the years I was in Vietnam, I did that and did it well."

He wasn't alone in reversing course from warrior to protester. In 1967, a handful of soldiers started Vietnam Veterans Against the War to oppose the conflict. Over time, the organization's ranks would swell to about 25,000 members. One of them, Jerry Lembcke, a chaplain's assistant assigned to the 41st Artillery Group in Vietnam, said by phone from Worcester, Mass., that Noble's segue was not unusual for veterans.

"From '68 on, in increasing numbers, Vietnam veterans came home looking for some opportunity to get involved in the anti-war movement," said Lembcke, author of *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory and the Legacy of Vietnam*. "And the anti-war movement reached out to Vietnam veterans and recruited them to the cause of ending the war. Their participation lent credibility to all the things that the anti-war people were saying about the Vietnam conflict."

When Nixon decided to bomb targets in Cambodia in an effort to cut off support for the North Vietnamese, Noble's feelings of dissent manifested itself in his letter to the president. On the day college students protesting the war students would be shot and killed at Kent State University in Ohio — the tragedy was one of the pivotal moments in the anti-war movement — Noble called the invasion of Cambodia "an intolerable deception."

"You may be sure that you have my unqualified dissent to the invasion as well as to the resumption of bombing inside North Vietnam," he wrote to Nixon.

Later that year Noble began photographing Mohawk steel workers in Manhattan, a hobby that evolved into a personal passion for Native American history and culture. In 1971 he took off on a cross-country road trip to visit Indian reservations and pueblos. In November 1971, he ended up in Santa Fe.

Here, he says he didn't become part of the hippie counterculture. Rather, he adds with a grin, "I was it."

He stepped away from any thoughts of Vietnam for some 20 years before slowly coming to terms with it with the help of friends, historians and other veterans. He's now working on a manuscript about his experiences.

Noble looks back at the war with "great sadness," he says. "It was a huge mistake morally, politically and economically. What's doubly sad is that so many politicians today haven't learned from it."

As for his letter to Nixon, he said he never heard back from the White House.

THEIR WORDS • RICHARD LEVINE

‘As a combat photographer, I was witness to the realities of war’

In 1967, I had just graduated from East Los Angeles Community College with an associate’s degree in photography, when I was drafted at the height of the Vietnam War. I asked for a postponement, so I could enlist and be trained as a combat photographer. I arrived in Vietnam in April 1968 at Cam Ranh Bay in the South China Sea, where the ship disgorged its 1,700 Army recruits. I Immediately transferred to the 4th PSYOP (Psychological Operations) Group.

During one particular PSYOP assignment, our Cessna O-2B Skymaster was mounted with loudspeakers blasting a Chieu Hoi (meaning “Open Arms”) message, an initiative by the South Vietnamese to encourage defection by the Viet Cong. We encountered ground fire meant to shoot down our aircraft. Fortunately, the O-2B could usually absorb enemy fire and return safely to base. It carried no ordnance. However, the mission was not seen as innocuous by the enemy, and thus we were really “sitting ducks” very much in danger with each flight.

On another mission I was sent to photograph was what was called a “Sparrow Hawk Mission,” usually flown in a Huey helicopter flying at treetop level to draw fire from Viet Cong ground troops, followed up by a helicopter gunship to take them out. I was in the lead chopper, so I would be able to photograph the gunship carrying out its mission. Nineteen sixty-eight turned out to be the deadliest year in the Vietnam War. What does a 22-year-old know and care about danger?

As a combat photographer, I was witness to the realities of war, and my photographs reflect this experience. Upon returning from one mission, I saw one patient lying on a stretcher on the floor of the terminal with a large hole in his head. I assumed he was dead, but realized to my horror that he was actually alive. This and other similar memories haunt me. I often wondered how I had survived and so many others had not.

I also took pictures of what passed for normal daily life of the Vietnamese people such as fishermen, children and village markets. One positive memory I have about my time in Nha Trang was at one tiny restaurant near the ocean where I was introduced to lobster thermidor. To this day I have not had a better meal.

I returned to the United States in December 1969. Since I provided my own camera equipment and film while in the service, I was able to keep most of the photographs that I took, except for the classified ones, which the Army kept. I have digitized over 3,900 photos from Vietnam and am currently working with a former PSYOPS Army buddy to publish a book on our experiences there.

Richard Levine during the Vietnam War, into which he was drafted after graduating with a photography degree.

Nighttime action captured by Levine. He was able to keep many photos he took in Vietnam due to bringing his own camera and has digitized thousands.

COURTESY PHOTOS

THEIR WORDS · VAHL JACKSON

‘An experience I treasure but would not recommend’

After graduating from high school in 1966, I enlisted in the Marines: boot camp in San Diego, advanced infantry training at Camp Pendleton (where I ended up as high shooter of the week) and assigned to Barstow, Calif., as a freight transportation clerk. I got to try out for the rifle team (didn’t make it), which got me out of the stuffy office cubicle I was in for a couple of weeks.

Six of us in the office were shipped off to Da Nang as members of the 3rd Marine Air Wing.

We landed in Da Nang in October 1967 in the most horrendous rainstorm imaginable. Kudos to the pilots because it was not easy.

I was stationed at the Marble Mountain airport as a freight transportation clerk. I basically loaded and unloaded C-130s and helicopters moving materials around the country. We moved troops to their units as space allowed us to.

The five of us who worked at our hut on the airstrip bought a fridge and went into business selling drinks. We’d take our forklift over to the mess hall and buy a pallet of sodas for 10 cents a can, put them in the fridge and sell them for 20 cents. It became a pretty good business and helped us not cash our paychecks.

We were on China Beach, but it was so hot, humid and rainy. Just nonstop.

Everything was moldy and rusty.

Each of the five of us was deployed for a month to an inland area called An Hoa. It was a strategic air base protected by the 3rd Marine Artillery Group. My month happened to be February 1968. I bragged to my buddies: I got the short month.

Vahl Jackson was recognized for being the high shooter of the week at Camp Pendleton.

COURTESY PHOTO

Well, that was the month the Tet Offensive happened all over the country. The 3rd Marines were deployed to Hue almost overnight. Needless to say, our base was less than protected. I was the only Marine left on the base to tend to the aircraft traffic.

We were told nightly that we might be overrun. Million-candlewatt flares were installed around the whole base. They hadn’t been installed a week when I got out of the bunker to relieve myself and tripped the wire to the flare. Under no circumstances were were to activate the flares unless we were under full-scale attack.

MISTAKE, BIG MISTAKE.

The flares were about four inches tall and attached to a wood post with metal reflectors pointing outward. Once activated, the flare melted the shield, caught the post on fire and lit our whole base up brighter than daylight. I thought I was in huge trouble but because of Tet, nothing happened.

Another incident occurred that same month that could have had dire results. I was walking to the mess hall, and one of our Huey helicopter gunships was landing nearby. A Huey has two rocket pods attached underneath and each one holds 19 122-mm rockets. One rocket could destroy a building.

Well, while they were landing and still about 25 feet above the ground, they accidentally fired two rockets that went right over the mess hall and exploded on a mountain beyond the base. The pilots landed and walked off like nothing had happened.

Another humorous incident happened while on of our forklift drivers was on the airstrip. These airstrips are metal panels laid on the ground. If bombs hit the runway, they can be replaced to keep the airstrip open. Our driver was driving the forklift way too fast on the airstrip with the forks too close to the ground. He buried the forks in the runway, the forklift went up in the air 10 feet, bent the forks beyond repair and trashed the forklift. The things we do as kids! Quite the scene.

One of the happiest days of my life was when we we returned and flew over the Golden Gate Bridge on our way to landing at Travis Air Force Base. I’d made it home safe and sound. An experience I treasure but would not recommend.

THEIR WORDS • JOSEPH BROPHY

‘Anger grew over the pointlessness of young men dying’

In 1969 — two years of college completed, unable to fund the third year — I enlisted in the Army’s flight school and completed helicopter pilot training. April 6, 1970 found me in country, a 20-year-old Warrant Officer, assigned to the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment.

The 11th Armored Cavalry Troop used three types of assault helicopters. UH-1’s, known as Hueys or Slicks, were the workhorses of the fleet. AH-1 Cobra attack gunships were fast, maneuverable and deadly. The Hughes OH-6 Loaches would fly low and slow, seeking out the enemy to draw fire, then calling in the gunships. I flew Hueys.

My new home was Quan Loi in the Iron Triangle northeast of Saigon, bordered on the west by the Cambodian Fishhook and Ho Chi Minh trail. To the east was the vast Cu Chi tunnel complex. Three weeks after arrival, we invaded Cambodia. For two months, we attacked the North Vietnamese Army at the Chup rubber plantation east of Phnom Penh and at Snuol in the Fishhook. Inflicting heavy casualties, we disrupted enemy use of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the NVA and Viet Cong supply route.

Inexplicably to those of us in combat, we were ordered by the president to withdraw.

We relocated south to Biên Hòa. For 10 months, we Slick pilots performed insertions-extractions of troops, snipers, tunnel rats and dog teams, using rope ladders when landing wasn’t possible. We provided medevac assistance, command and control of infantry and tank operations, artillery strikes, and even Phantom jet strikes. I also flew nighthawk missions, lights blacked out, loaded to the hilt with miniguns, grenades and M79 grenade launchers, sensor drops on trails for intelligence reports and an Agent Orange drop on a fortified Cu Chi tunnel complex. Partnering with a gunship, I flew evening rocket recon missions to thwart enemy attacks on our compound. Along the way, I was promoted to chief warrant officer and aircraft commander.

From left, Joseph Brophy, Charlie Harrington and Wayne Morvent, seen in Saigon, were Huey pilots with the 11th Air Cavalry Regiment. COURTESY PHOTO

By April 4, 1971, I had survived a year in Vietnam, at first alternating between fear of impending death and exhilaration over controlling a powerful war machine. Then I snapped, realizing that in order to survive, I had to block out the fear of bullets slamming through the helicopter, landing in fields filled with gunfire, being shot down and nighttime B-52 bombing strikes.

This mental adjustment produced a warrior who concentrated only on the moment, blocking out all thoughts beyond survival and getting the job done, creating a sense of control that was life changing. However, the strain of living under extreme stress as the war dragged on took its toll. A kind of craziness set in, knowing that although we were the far superior force, we could not win. Anger grew over the pointlessness of young men dying.

However, I have never lost my pride and gratitude to have flown above, and with, the best. We accomplished our missions and service to our country together.

THEIR WORDS • HENRY RIVERA

‘I started law school. I was drafted two weeks later.’

Henry Rivera had just begun law school when he was drafted; he later finished at UNM. COURTESY PHOTO

In September 1968, I started law school. I was drafted two weeks later. My father, Henry E. Rivera, a World War II vet who made the landing on D-Day at Utah Beach, drove me to the induction station. There, having passed the physical, I was notified I was “going.” My group was sworn in, and the man administering the oath went down the line saying, “You, you, you and you are Marines. The rest of you are Army.” The fellow to my right was the last Marine, so I was almost a Marine.

I went to basic training at Fort Ord, Calif., where I received orders to report to Fort Sill, Okla., for training as a cannoneer — I was to be in the artillery. As we stepped off the bus at Fort Sill, the drill sergeant announced that we’d better pay attention to what we were going to be taught because we were going to be in Vietnam in eight weeks. That put a damper on any enthusiasm. We reported to the Oakland Army Base and then on to Travis Air Force Base, where we boarded an aircraft bound for Tan Son Nhut Air Base just outside Saigon.

On our flight over, we stopped to refuel in Anchorage, Alaska. We got off the plane and began to discuss when we would land in Saigon. We determined it would be in the early morning. Someone said, “That’s when the Viet Cong usually attack. We should try to delay our flight so that we arrive in daylight.”

One of the guys told the noncommissioned officer in charge of our group that while he was in the terminal, some civilian told him there was a bomb on the plane. The NCO deplaned everybody, called the military police and FBI, who came out to inspect the plane — which was declared bomb-free. We had delayed the flight by several hours. Needless to say, the NCO was not happy with us.

We arrived at Long Binh, where we were billeted for about a week in order to acclimate to the weather and time difference from the United States. I found the clerk who was making the assignments to the various units and invited him for a beer at the post bar. I told him I could type and I’m sure he needed a clerk. He assigned me to an artillery battalion, and I became the “Radar O’Reilly” of headquarters there.

I also became a squad leader and part of the “reactionary force” — a group that had to counterattack whenever the enemy attacked our post. I carried a grenade launcher and a .45 automatic. My tour was over in a year, and I returned to the United States with time yet to serve in the Army. I got an “early out” to return to law school at the University of New Mexico, which I did by September 1970.

Roger Blanco, third from left, in 1968.

COURTESY IMAGE

THEIR WORDS • ROGER BLANCO

‘My platoon lost 17 men that night’

January 3, 1968: My company was attacked at Landing Zone Leslie in the Khe Sanh Valley by a North Vietnamese Army sapper battalion. We knew from captured NVA soldiers that we were going to be attacked. We thought we were alert and ready for it, but still it came as a big surprise. It happened all at once.

At 2 p.m., NVA rounds came into the perimeter from every direction, and sappers with satchel charges penetrated our defenses. They blew up four of my platoon’s bunkers during the first minute of the attack. I left a still-secure bunker position to come to the aid and defense of these troopers in the blown-out bunker area who were still alive.

I low-crawled most of the way. Many were already dead. I wasn’t really thinking, all I wanted to do was to help these guys. I tripped over bodies in the dark and dodged NVA sniper rounds. I applied tourniquets to wounded troopers so they wouldn’t bleed to death. I organized the less severely wounded into defensible positions just in case the NVA made more attacks.

During the course of the night, I made three trips to this sector of the perimeter, carting with me much-needed water for the wounded and resupply of ammo for those still defending. Heavy fighting raged elsewhere around the perimeter, but we managed to hold on. At sunup, the fighting ended. Hundreds of dead NVA soldiers lay just outside our perimeter, and there were a lot dead inside the perimeter, too. My platoon lost 17 men that night, men who were either dead or so severely wounded they never returned to combat duty. I was told we lost 112 Americans in the Khe Sanh Valley that week but that we killed 1,200 NVA.

My platoon leader, Lt. Paul Becker, wrote up a citation to award me with a Silver Star for my actions that night, but I never got the award. Before the end of February, our battalion lost more than half its remaining men, mostly during the first few days of the Tet Offensive, where we fought in the battle for Hue. A lot of paperwork was lost during that time too, including the citation for my Silver Star Award.

RESOURCES FOR VETERANS

Courtesy city of Santa Fe, santafenm.gov/veterans_resources

JOBS AND EDUCATION

- Santa Fe Community College — Veterans Resource Center (VRC), sfcc.edu/veterans, 505-428-1000
- Santa Fe Community College Foundation Veterans Scholarship, sfcc.ed, 505-428-1000
- Veterans Business Outreach Center, nmdvs.org/vboc, 505-383-2400

HOUSING

- Homewise, homewise.org, 505-983-9473
- Santa Fe Housing Trust, housingtrustonline.org, 505-989-3960
- Interfaith Community Shelter Homeless Veteran Services, interfaithsheltersf.org, 505-795-7494
- St. Elizabeth Shelter and Supportive Housing, steshelter.org, 505-982-6611
- VA Home Loan Information, benefits.va.gov/homeloans, 844-698-2311
- Santa Fe Goodwill Industries, goodwillnm.org, 505-881-6401
- R&R for Vets, 505-699-0919, Provides roofs, ramps and interior repairs to disabled vets in need or to their surviving spouses, without cost to them.

FOOD

- Santa Fe Senior Services Meals on Wheels, santafenm.gov/division_of_senior_services, 505-955-4748
- Kitchen Angels, kitchenangels.org, 505-471-7780

HEALTH AND WELLNESS

- Santa Fe Vet Center, va.gov/directory/guide/facility.asp?ID=491, 505-988-6562
- Santa Fe Goodwill Industries, goodwillnm.org, 505-881-6401
- Servant of the Heart Life Skills Center, stjohnsantafe.weconnect.com/servant-heart, 505-983-5034
- U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, va.gov
- Horses for Heroes, horsesforheroes.org, 505-798-2535
- VIST: Visual Impairment Services Team, prosthetics.va.gov/blindrehab/VIST.asp

TRANSPORTATION

- New Mexico Department of Veterans Services, Santa Fe, 505-827-6300
- New Mexico Department of Veterans Services, Albuquerque, 505-383-2400
- New Mexico Department of Transportation, 505-827-5100
- VA Transportation, 505-265-1711, ext. 1053
- Department of Veterans Affairs New Mexico, Albuquerque, 505-346-4864
- NCRTD, 866-206-0754
- New Mexico Park & Ride, 505-424-1110
- Santa Fe Trails, 866-551-7433
- New Mexico Rail Runner, 866-795-7245
- Atomic City Transit, 505-661-7433
- N.M. Veterans Integration Centers, 505-265-0512

VETERANS ORGANIZATIONS

- VFW Post 2951, 307 Montezuma Ave., Santa Fe, 505-983-9045, vfwpost2951.business.site
- American Legion, Montoya Y Montoya, NM Post 1, 1601 Berry Ave., Santa Fe, 505-982-9622
- American Legion, Conrado Lucero, NM Post 12, 1000 Cordova Place #906, Santa Fe, nmpost12.org
- American Legion Riders, nmalr.org/chapters
- Santa Fe Veterans Alliance, santafeveteransalliance.org
- Women Veterans of New Mexico, womenveteransofnewmexico.org/home_HELH.php
- American Veterans for Equal Rights-Bataan Chapter, aver-nm.org
- New Mexico Military Museum Foundation, newmexicomilitarymuseumfoundation.org

VETERANS DAY NOVEMBER 11, 2019