

Steve Hayduk

'Not a Day That Goes by That Vietnam Doesn't Cross My Mind'

Steve Hayduk was an 18-year-old high school dropout working as a truck driver in Deer Park when he joined the Army's aviation school in 1969. In Vietnam, he served as a helicopter crew chief manning an M-60 machine gun. Today, he is a Suffolk County public works commissioner. He is divorced and has five sons.

The day I took my first combat ride in Vietnam, soon after we arrived, I noticed a Green Beret chatting with my chopper pilot. He said his guys had been without food or ammo for days. The pilot turned to me and said, "Hey, chief, you want to go to Ben Het?"

I said, "I don't know. I never been there."

The special forces guy got on board. We loaded up C-rations and ammo.

The pilot told me we weren't really going to land. He said just start kicking the stuff out the door once we got over the area. A couple of miles before we got there, the pilot dropped to treetop level and started to push the chopper at top speed. We were going down roads and over trees like the hairiest roller coaster ride. My eyes started burning and somebody yelled "CSI!" That was a type of tear gas.

Suddenly, the pilot came up full power over a hill surrounded by concertina wire. Below was a small compound in a circle on a hill occupied by special forces. When I looked down, I saw fear in the faces of the guys in the bunkers. I understood a second later when the mortars started coming in. One hit under our left side and another on

our right. They were so close, they must have gone between the rotor blades.

We got blown up into the air, but we kept hovering over the site. There was gunfire and more explosions. For the first time, I grabbed a machine gun and started shooting in anger. I was firing at anything I could see and kicking supplies out the door. The special forces sergeant kept tapping me on the shoulder. He kept tapping and tapping. I finally turned around. Blood was pumping out of a bullet hole in his cheek. He was trying to hand me his first aid kit.

I bandaged it, then went back to kicking out supplies. The helicopter was shuddering like crazy, but we made it back.

That was my first flight in Vietnam. They took the special forces guy to an aid station. The chopper was shot to hell. It never flew again. I flew back to Ben Het

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VIETNAM
20
YEARS
AFTER

Second of five parts. Veterans talk about their service, and their lives since, 20 years after the fall of Saigon. As told to Newsday writer James Kindall.



Hayduk at Suffolk County Vietnam Memorial

Newsday / Audrey C. Tiernan

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many times. It was under siege for 40 days. That night I had guard duty. I remember looking over the perimeter imagining Viet Cong crawling everywhere and thinking it was going to be a long year.

Most of my time in Vietnam I worked on secret missions with Command and Control Central. They were specially trained forces who gathered intelligence, snatched prisoners and blew up enemy camps. They had a high mortality rate. If we lost anyone on an insertion into Laos or Cambodia, where they were lost wasn't reported.

After my first six months in Vietnam, I was disillusioned. We believed in what we were fighting for, but the government wouldn't allow us to win. We bombed and stopped bombing. Sometimes we knew exactly where the enemy was, but we weren't allowed to go after them.

At one point, I told the commanding officer I didn't want to fly any more. He gave me a desk job. After two months I asked to go back on the choppers. Mostly, I did it because I was experienced and thought I might be able to save some guys. I had a month left in my tour when I got a 28-day drop. They'd started the Vietnamization thing and we got early leaves. Man, I couldn't believe I was going home. I turned in my supplies and gave away my weapons. I turned in my mattress and lay down on the springs. That night all hell broke loose. A group of sappers tunneled under our compound and threw explosives at the choppers. I woke

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up and thought, give me a break. Here I am. No M-16. No grenades. Nothing.

Then I thought, if they didn't get me in a year, they're not going to do it now. I went back to sleep.

They blew up 17 of the 23 choppers in our unit. The next day, I flew to Washington State.

I was going to catch a plane to Deer Park and surprise my family. On the taxi ride from Kennedy, I was thinking about being in Vietnam the day before, hanging out with guys with blood all over them and choppers being blown up. I said to the driver, I was just back from Vietnam.

He said, "So what?"

Things like that is why so many vets don't talk about it.

My best friend Bates died there. He was an all-American boy; a football player and really the nicest guy. He only had a couple of weeks left. I remember the two of us sitting in the hooch drinking cocoa from our C-rations and listening to "Crimson and Clover" by Tommy James and the Shondells.

The next day, I had a fever. They sent his chopper out instead of mine. The mission went bad. Bates got a .51-caliber in the forehead. It blew his brains out. Later on, I got to thinking about it. Why was I risking my life? Why were my friends risking their lives? Why did Bates die? I couldn't come up with any justification.

Years later, I got involved with the construction of the Suffolk County Vietnam memorial. The dedication was a very emotional time with thousands of people there. When I went home that night, I had a great sense of accomplishment and sadness because all the guys I'd fought with in my unit I hadn't seen in 24 years. And I thought how absurd it was to live with guys closer than brothers and never see them again. At that moment, I decided to get the helicopter unit back together for a reunion.

After two years, I found 75 of them, plus a Green Beret who we flew on our missions and even a Montagnard (the aborigine people who fought with the United States against the North Vietnamese).

We held the reunion over a weekend in



Hayduk was copter crew chief

Florida. Some of the men I expected to be very successful, because they had been so competent in Vietnam, hadn't done very well.

A captain in our unit, for instance, was a very accomplished chopper pilot and had a storybook marriage. His wife used to write him a letter every day. He was kind of the envy of everyone in the company. At the reunion, I found out he was working on a road crew and twice divorced. There was a warrant officer there, a helicopter pilot and one of the bravest men I ever knew. Since he got back, he'd been in and out of jail for selling drugs and was now a chauffeur.

Both of these men had great potential and it was kind of sad to see that I have a hard time with people who blame their problems on Vietnam. I suspect in a lot of cases they had problems before. But I will say that Vietnam left a mark on anyone who served there.

At the reunion, the best times were when we sat around looking at photos and home movies. We remembered all the fun things we did between missions back

at the base camp. One guy had a picture of one of our pilots who used to land his helicopter in the river shallows and wash it while he was buck naked. We'd forgotten he used to do naked helicopter washings.

One of the most exciting moments for me was when a fellow with gray hair and a beard wandered over. He said, "Hi, I'm Bob Ridge." I said, "Hi, I'm Steve Hayduk." We grabbed each other. He'd been the door gunner on my helicopter and I hadn't seen him since 1969.

Personally, Vietnam gave me a drive to improve myself. I was a good student but I was interested in other things, not college. Vietnam helped me with my maturity and to put things in perspective. When I came back, I used the GI Bill to go to college. So, even if it was in many ways a negative experience, I turned it into a positive one.

There's not a day that goes by that Vietnam doesn't cross my mind. At the base, they used to burn our latrine waste with jet fuel. I caught a whiff of something like that one day and I was right back there. At the reunion, I told the guys about the jet fuel smell and there was a murmur of agreement in the crowd.

How often do I think of Vietnam? How many times a day do you think of your kids or your wife or your girlfriend? It had to do with the magnitude of it. It was a total 24-hour experience for a year — that is if you made it through the year. It wasn't like a year in college or on a job. We were there to fight, to keep ourselves alive.

It was terrifying and you were on the other side of the world in an exotic environment. All you did was count the days until you came home.