

# For Vietnam Vet, YHS Diploma Is Just Icing On The Cake

BY ALISSA WOOCKMAN

alissa.woockman@yankton.net

At Yankton School District's school board meeting in August, Yankton High School principal Dr. Jennifer Johnke announced what she called one of the highlights in her career. Vietnam veteran and Yankton native Michael Welsh would receive an honorary YHS diploma for the class of 1966.

Having dropped out as a junior to join the Armed Forces, Welsh is excited to attend his 50th class reunion next year.

"I have several other degrees, but this one has always eluded me," he said.

Not much else has eluded Welsh since he joined the Army in 1964 and served as part of the Marine Corps 1st battalion, 5th marine regiment infantry unit from January 1965 to December 1966.

In 1964, Welsh was a 17-year-old junior at Yankton High School. While still in his adolescence, he wanted to do some risk taking of his own that extended beyond the boundaries of Yankton, so he enlisted in the Marine Corps.

"I felt I had come to the end of what I was supposed to be as a teenager and a student, and I wanted something different," he said.

It was his family's history in the military that led Welsh toward his future career in the Marines. His father, who died when Welsh was young, was in the Army. His uncle was also a part of the Army, involved with tankers in the Korean War.

After a bit of arguing, his mother agreed to let Welsh join the military. She thought that the Marines were the best place for Welsh, having the toughest reputation of all the other branches.

In January 1965, Welsh arrived in San Diego to begin what would be a new chapter – and one of the toughest challenges – of his life.

"Like any marine going to boot camp, the drill instructors are really tough," Welsh said. "Once we met the drill instructors, my first thought was, 'What did I get myself into here?'"

Fortunately, Welsh had participated in football and wrestling at Yankton High School, which gave him an edge on the physical training.

But the mental toughness, Welsh admits, was the most difficult part.



Mike Welsh, a marine veteran in the Vietnam War, is photographed in the summer/fall of 1965 when his battalion was training at Kaneohe Bay on Oahu in Hawaii. Welsh and his fellow soldiers would board ships for Vietnam after eight months of training.

Three weeks into training, Welsh received the position of platoon guide, and squad leaders began reporting to him. His doubts about the training and the instructors soon were replaced by feelings of success.

"I went from somebody that no one figured would make it to the top guy," Welsh said. "I always had the foundation there. It was just the motivation, enthusiasm and change I needed to get back on track."

But Welsh's pride was short-lived when, nearing graduation, he learned his Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) was standard infantry.

"Everyone was saying, 'Welsh is honor man of the platoon, he'll have something like intel or sea duty,'" Welsh said. "When I saw my name on the list, I was surprised. But I soon figured out that most of the top guys go to the infantry in the Marines. They want the guys who are in the

best shape so they can take the orders and give the orders."

Welsh spent a short time at Camp Pendleton in Southern California before he packed up for a journey overseas.

After 11 days on an old LST ship, Welsh arrived in Hawaii – not for a tropical getaway, but to complete more training in anticipation for duty in Vietnam.

From June 1965 to February 1966, Welsh participated in rigger training, amphibious landings, guerilla warfare, mountaineering school and beach storming.

He was then assigned to Vietnam. His first operation was in the Mekong Delta in southwestern Vietnam in early March 1966. Welsh recalls his first impressions of the country.

"The first day in the country, we had hundreds of heat casualties in the battalion because we were

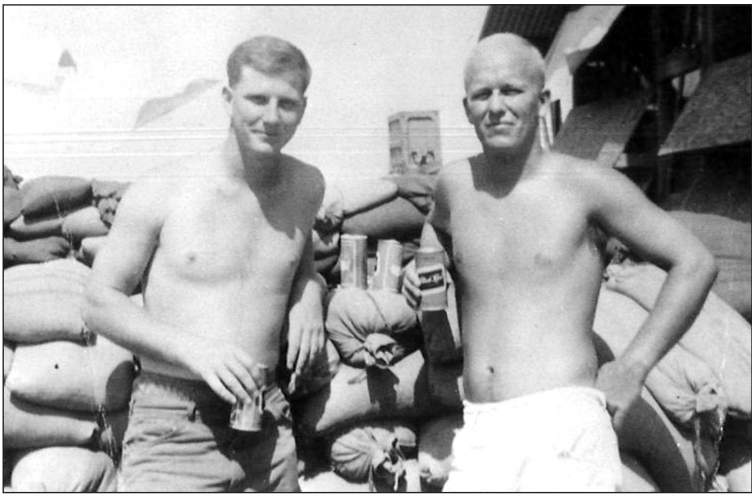


PHOTO: MIKE WELSH

Mike Welsh, Marine Veteran in the Vietnam War (left), visited the hospital in Chu Lai in August 1965 after jumping off a rice paddy dike after a sweeping story mission, spraining his ankle. Dennis Callahan, also of Yankton (right), was a Navy Seabee working in the operating rooms at the med center during Welsh's treatment.

moving so fast," he recalled. "We thought we were hot stuff – being Marines and in great shape – but the climate and geography of the place just kicked our butt. We got humbled pretty quickly from that."

While trudging through the jungle, heat wasn't the only problem Welsh and the rest of the soldiers encountered.

"It was the nastiest place in the world," Welsh said. "We lost guys down there, not just from enemy activity but a couple of them drowned in the river. There were red fire ants, leeches, snakes and a lot of bugs. Plus, the Viet Cong were always mining and booby trapping the place."

Welsh and the rest of his team completed their missions, but the "victories" were fleeting. Once his team pushed the Viet Cong out of the area, the enemy simply found its way back in after the Marines left. According to Welsh, that continued to plague U.S. forces throughout the war.

Welsh continued to work at the Vietnamese Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), the established dividing line between North and South Vietnam, to clear the area.

A troop and cargo carrier named the USS Pickaway, which held a few companies of infantry soldiers, hosted Welsh and his unit in July. While aboard Higgins boats, the troops could do amphibious landings in multiple ways. The team landed in Chu Lai and carried out the next four months doing search-and-destroy missions.

"By that time, we had taken our gear down to the very basic stuff," Welsh said. "We all slept in rubber ponchos."

During an August sweeping mission, Welsh jumped off a rice paddy dike, landed in some soft sand and sprained his ankle. After his time in the medical center, he was sent out again, this time moving from his 5th Marine Regiment to the company of the 1st.

"1st Marines were sent in to Vietnam beforehand and were nearing the end of their 13-month cycle," Welsh said. "They needed experienced guys to fill in."

He spent the rest of his time in the Du Nang area, north of Chu Lai. The operations were from the DMZ down to southwest Chu Lai and Laos. The new soldiers that were coming in to the country at the time did not have the same experiences as Welsh did with the rest of his battalion.

"Our whole battalion went over together, trained together and stayed together the whole time. We knew one another and were good friends," Welsh said. "After that, they started sending replacements over for individuals. They hadn't had any time to train together and get to know one another to bond. The brotherhood that you always talk about, they didn't have a chance to do those things to become a brother. One day, you are just thrown into a new unit and you don't know anyone's names."

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