

For Merkel And Others, Vietnam Was A Different World

BY ALISSA WOOCKMAN

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For Dennis Merkel, going to Vietnam was like traveling to a different world.

The Crofton, Nebraska, native and the rest of his troops had little to no contact with the events going on back in the U.S. and the attitude of the war. All they could do was carry out the orders and await the day when their services were no longer required.

"We were sent here," Merkel said. "We don't really want to be here, but we can't walk away because we don't really have a place to go. We are here for one purpose, to get back home."

Merkel was born April 28, 1947, and served his country as part of the U.S. Army 1st Cav infantry unit in the Vietnam War from January 1969 through December 1969.

When Merkel was 19, he moved from his home in Crofton to Sioux City, Iowa, to attend Western Iowa Tech Community College. He was participating in his nine-month course of meat packing when the opportunity of joining the Army presented itself.

In 1966, Merkel's cousin, who was also his college roommate, was in the National Guard and had to make a trip to the army one night after work. Merkel decided to accompany him. While there, he met with an administrative sergeant who asked him if he ever thought about joining the National Guard. He mentioned the details of fulfilling a military obligation of six years, the basic training, Advanced Infantry Training (AIT), two-week summer camps each year and weekend guard drills once a month.

"I said I would probably just wait until I get drafted and then go," Merkel said.

A couple weeks later, Merkel accompanied his cousin once again to the armory and was approached by yet another administrative sergeant. This time, he was told he could time it to when he got out of school. Merkel could live at home, hold down a job and fulfill the military requirement.

"I thought about it," he said. "I saw the benefits in it, and (the administrative sergeant) wasn't trying to dodge anything, so I said, 'OK, I'm going to do what I need to do.'"

Merkel joined the Army National Guard in the spring of 1966. He was sent to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, for basic training.

After the eight weeks of basic training, two summer training sessions and approximately 30 weekends of guard drills, Merkel was activated. He was one of between 12,000 and 13,000 Army National Guard members activated during the Vietnam War, either as individual volunteers or in units.

He traveled to Fort Carson, Colorado, in April 1968 where he was placed in the First Cavalry Division as an infantry soldier.

"You were the same as everyone else in training," Merkel said. "You had everybody, from drafted, to enlisted, to National Guard."

From there, Merkel and the other soldiers in his unit trained in a rifle company. This is where Merkel earned his expert shooter's badge, the highest of the three levels earned.

In January 1969, Merkel and his unit were sent to Vietnam.

"There were a lot of National Guards in Vietnam," Merkel said. "The National Guard people were older. The drafted were 18-19 years old, I was already 21. (The Guards) were more adult — conscientious of the next guy. I think it made a better soldier out of them."

Merkel recalls the first day he arrived at the Bien Hoa Air Base.

"In January, you are cold over here," Merkel said. "When I got over



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there, I remember when they opened the doors and you stepped out, it was like, 'WOW!' It was hot."

Because Merkel was an Army National Guard member, he was immediately given the rank of sergeant. Shortly thereafter, he was made a staff sergeant. While in Vietnam, he was a team leader, squad leader, platoon sergeant and, for a two-week period, a first sergeant. Finally, Merkel took over the position of platoon leader as a sergeant.

"I held every position except for the company commander in the field," Merkel said.

As platoon sergeant, he would get called in every morning to the command post to get his orders for the day. Sometimes the missions would consist of covering more ground.

"We have to get from point A to point B 4,000 meters away, going through jungle and it's going to be on foot in a company size (80-250 soldiers)," Merkel said.

The First Cavalry Division became an air assault division after the Korean War. This meant Merkel also worked with helicopters as troop carriers, cargo lift ships, medical evacuations and aerial rocket artillery.

"You cut a landing pad to get the choppers in, which come in four or five at a time," Merkel said. "They land between you, you run and hop in a helicopter and fly usually about 5-8 miles away."

Once his group landed, Merkel and the rest of the soldiers got out and set up a perimeter around the area.

"We powder the place with 60 machine guns and rockets out of the culvers, because you don't know what is there," Merkel said. "That way, when the rest of them come, you make things more secure."

The Vietnam War's focus was embedded within the conflict between North and South Vietnam. Many might wonder how U.S. soldiers felt about fighting a battle that was not their own. But Merkel said that most soldiers were unaware of the details of the war.

He said, everyone there lived each day as it came, not thinking too much about the future. Orders came in, troops marched out and, hopefully, they all make it home.

Merkel and his fellow soldiers did not have much contact from the outside world. Only letters back and forth would provide the group with an indication of America's attitude toward the war.

"I use to write a letter back home to ask a question and, three weeks later, I would get a 'yes,'" Merkel said. "Things were so slow. They had the Stars and Stripes newspaper we got to read once a month but most of the time, you just didn't know what was going on back there."

With no direct line of communication back home, soldiers carried out orders as they flowed down the chain of command, hoping each day would be one step closer to home.

After hours spent trailing through the jungle, carrying all the essentials on your back and killing bogs for entertainment, a simple thing such as the opportunity for a shower was a welcome relief.

"I actually carried a shower with me," Merkel said. "It was a three-gallon bucket with a handle and a shower nozzle. As a platoon sergeant, I would always try to do something where my platoon would appreciate it."

Merkel recalls wearing the same clothes for about three weeks. They had only one extra pair of socks, which seemed impossible to keep dry tramping through the jungle. With wet feet came "jungle rot" (nickname for a tropical ulcer) or lesions on the body caused by microorganisms in tropical climates.

"At the end of the day, it rained," Merkel said. "There is nothing worse than wet feet. I would have it just about up to my knees from walking through steams."

Through all the conflict and less-than-desirable conditions, the time spent with your platoon was a rare bond. The closeness that Merkel develop with his fellow soldiers made



PHOTO: DENNIS MERKEL

LEFT: Veteran Dennis Merkel sports his Crofton, Nebraska, American Legion Post No. 128 hat as current Sergeant-At-Arms for the organization. Merkel served in the Army National Guard for four years and was a member of the U.S. Army 1st Cav infantry unit in the Vietnam War from January-December 1969. ABOVE: Merkel (right) and friend are photographed in the field during their time served in Vietnam in 1969. Merkel was platoon sergeant involved in covering territory and helicopter combat assaults near the village of Suong Bay.

the environment easier to handle.

"You learn to get really close to the people you are with because you're saving their butt and they're saving you're butt," Merkel said. "You still remember their faces, their actions, their voices, and I know a lot of them are gone already — some while we were there."

The platoon traveled to several villages in Vietnam, including: Kwan Lui, Fong Vin, Tay Ong, Suong Bay and Len Lock. Merkel remembers moving through poverty-stricken villages, with families living in one-room shacks with their pig in the yard and kids coming out to say hello.

"When we get by these villages, these kids would come running out," Merkel said. "They knew you had crackers and chocolate, which was like heaven to them."

As a platoon leader, Merkel also worked with quite a few Vietnam soldiers, or ARVNs (Army of the Republic of Viet Nam). He recalls their attitude in comparison to the U.S. soldiers.

"They were crazy," Merkel said. "They had no fear. Some of those kids were 15 and 16 years old. Being there in '69, they had years of using up the 20-21-year-olds."

Merkel's platoon also had an interpreter they traveled with in order to gather information from North Vietnam's opposing forces.

"I remember he said to me, 'I've been interpreting for nine years. You guys get to go home, I don't.'"

After approximately 10 months in Vietnam, Merkel was picked up from the field the end of November 1968. He was hauled back to Ben Wong, got on a plane and made it home before Christmas.

"That was quite a feeling, flying out of there," Merkel said.

The rest of his unit came back in spurts and were all home a week later. After returning to Sioux City, Merkel continued to be on Army reserve for another two years.

When he did return home, he encountered the negative feelings the American people harbored for the war

and the veterans.

"With the people back here, we got called some pretty bad names," Merkel said. "It's not that way now. The U.S. people are really behind the military right now, which is really good. It makes us, as Vietnam veterans, a little envious of what we didn't get."

Merkel's service ended in 1971.

After serving his time in the National Guard, Merkel went right back to work. Utilizing his meat cutting skills from completing the program at Western Iowa Tech, he went to work for several meat conglomerates.

"I graduated on a Friday, went to work on a Monday, and I've been working ever since," Merkel said. "That was 50 years ago."

He ultimately went into the insulation and siding field, starting his own business in Crofton in 1978. He built a facilities hub and is currently operating it today.

As a member of Crofton's American Legion #128 for 35 years, Merkel is currently Sergeant-At-Arms. He also belongs to Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) Post 5283 in Hartington, Nebraska. Merkel has also attended a couple of reunions of his National Guard Unit in Sioux City, Iowa, and ran into quite a few people from his days in Fort Carson.

"I would like to sometime go back and see those places where I was at," Merkel said, referring to his military experience. "I lived a really important part of my life there."

Medals/Citations/Commendations

Merkel received during his service:

- Bronze Star Medal
- Air Medal
- National Defense Service Medal
- Vietnam Service Medal
- Republic of Vietnam Campaign Medal

- Vietnam Gallantry Cross
- Presidential Unit Citation
- Army Meritorious Unit Commendation

- Expert Marksmanship Qualification Badge
- Combat Infantryman Badge

Veterans

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One dear friend was ready to talk albeit anonymously. He told me he didn't want to be glorified in the paper because he wasn't a hero. He went to Vietnam and called himself and others like him "ground-pounders." Every day, his battalion went looking for Viet Cong — to kill them. They would be dropped somewhere deep in the jungle, left for days, beating the brush for the enemy. And they usually got food flown in once a week; clean clothes were hard to come by.

He remembered one time when they thought they had been forgotten and hunger was getting to be a real issue. He said they depended on that air drop lifeline for food and ciga-

rettes with a capital C. The extreme elements they endured — heat and mosquitoes — made a food drop the highlight of the week.

Being a farm boy, boot camp was fun, he thought at first. Camping out, bivouac, etc., it was a like a vacation. Sure, they were trained to hate the Viet Cong but it didn't take even a week — seven short days — after they landed on the Vietnamese beach to find out it was real; it wasn't summer camp anymore. And the longer he was there, the stronger the hate became. As he looks back, he realizes it was progressive. It was about survival. They did things to his friends. In his brain, he rationalized, he had a mission to do — get even or worse.

A psychologist told him once his brain had been chemically altered. He had been raised as a good German Catholic and taught killing was wrong. For the rest of his life, he

would battle the morality of knowing killing was wrong but he was killing those "gooks" anyway. It was the only way for him to survive. Peace of mind and heart would always be elusive for him.

Recently he went on a golf outing with several classmates. Out of the eight in the golfing party, seven went into the service. Four were in combat. They sat around a table at the end of the day, and everyone shared what their tour of duty was like with the one classmate who went to college — a draft dodger, they were called. But no animosity was displayed; the veterans held no resentment.

On the drive home, the college grad said he had no clue what the others had gone through.

It was kind of that way for all Americans when the soldiers came home from Vietnam. Those news-

casts were very informative for the American public; so informative that a hatred began for the Vietnamese conflict and boiled over to the returning soldiers. There was no fanfare, no ticker-tape parades, no cheering crowds and no hero worship.

Those young men were trained, some would say brainwashed, for killing. Many of those young American men — and even some women, who served as nurses in Army camps and hospitals near the fighting — were good Christians who were raised knowing killing was morally wrong.

Their tours of duty changed their mindset for the rest of their lives. Some were able to handle it; some weren't. Alcohol and drugs were readily available to the soldiers and addiction became a very real, serious problem when they came home to the good old USA.

After 9/11, my friend's sons came to him, ready to enlist, to follow in dad's footsteps — and he panicked. He wanted to grab them and say, "Think about what you are about to do." It was his greatest nightmare: that they would suffer like he has all these years. It was his biggest blessing when they failed their physicals.

He never regrets his time served and would do it again for his country. It was his duty. He is a very dedicated, honorable American.

I thank God every day for the men, like my friend, who became soldiers and pledged their lives for their country — and continue to do that every day. They fought for our freedom and lost pieces of themselves, friends and family along the way. We all did. And for that, my friend, and all the others with whom you share that common bond, you will always be my heroes.

