



VETERAN SPOTLIGHT

Terry Kennedy

U.S. Army Specialist E-4

The easiest thing for Terry Kennedy to do would have been to head north to Canada. After all, he was born there and had plenty of relatives still living up there.

“My dad really encouraged me to do it,” Kennedy recalls. “My brother had been drafted ahead of me, and had done a tour in Viet Nam. I guess my dad really didn’t want to go through that again.”

But Kennedy knew that he couldn’t dodge the draft; he had become a U.S. Citizen many years earlier, and had sworn his allegiance to the country that he now called his own. The year was 1967 when he received his draft notice. It couldn’t have happened at a more tumultuous time for the US, and for Kennedy, under more incongruent circumstances.

“I was in Puerto Rico at the time, teaching Spanish to, of all people, Peace Corp trainees.”

Kennedy had volunteered for the Peace Corp three years earlier in 1964 when he graduated from college. At the time, there was a belief that if you were in the Peace Corp, you weren’t subject to the draft.

Not true.

The bogus Peace Corp exemption notwithstanding, Kennedy thought he might never have to serve for another reason: he was getting too old.

“I was 26 when my notice came, and the cutoff was 27, so I almost made it,” he laughs.

And so it was off to Fort Ord in Northern California, where Kennedy not only went through basic training, but also found that he was the oldest recruit in his platoon. Being the eldest didn’t help allay any of his fears though, and it was admittedly, a very scary time for Kennedy.

“We all knew what the odds were about going to Viet Nam and possibly getting killed, so it was always in the back of your mind.”

He was trained as a clerk, and because of his college degree, was soon tasked with teaching others in his unit, an assignment he thought might keep him from going overseas.

Again, not true.

“My entire unit was shipped to Korea. I was the only one who was sent to Viet Nam. So much for luck.”

He arrived shortly thereafter and was sent to First Air Cavalry Division at the DMZ, where his job was to type in the coordinates for B-52 bombing runs. After three months on the DMZ, he was sent back to a base north of Saigon, where the fighting was equally as fierce.

“Some of the bombing coordinates I had to send out were very close to our base, and you could feel the earth shake when the bombs hit.”

They also took incoming fire regularly, and even as a clerk he learned, among other things, how to identify the distinct “whistling” sound of an incoming missile. The Viet Cong were terrible shots, but every once in a while, they got lucky.

“A hooch on the base took a direct hit one night, and everybody inside got killed,” Kennedy said. “After that, we had sandbags all around our cots when we slept.”

In spite of the constant danger, there were some lighter, more humorous moments as well.

Kennedy smiles. “A lot of the guys in my unit, they were rougher than I was, and they noticed that I never used profanity - ever. Well, this was something that they could not tolerate, and they began working on me. Finally one night I had had enough and said, ‘okay – what do you want me to say?’”

“They told me that I had to use this one word, a very foul word, in every way I could possibly use it – and so I did, for the next five minutes or so. I said it in every form and in every way possible, until they were satisfied.”

Kennedy returned to the states in 1969 and settled in Gardena, where he still lives today with his wife.

Interviewed and written by: Christopher J. Lynch

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