

Presented By The Wisconsin American Legion Foundation's
Celebration of Freedom

STORIES OF HONOR

Stories of risk, sacrifice, duty and honor.

Marshfield resident Chuck Hennes served in the Marine Corps during Vietnam from 1967-1970. It would prove to be the most grueling three years of his life.

After his brother was drafted into the U.S. Army while in college, Hennes and a friend decided to sign up, too.

"We were going to join on the buddy plan," Hennes said. "We went on a motorcycle trip to Milwaukee. They sent him home and sent me to San Diego. He failed the physical. So much for the buddy plan."

Hennes did his basic training at Camp Pendleton in California. However, since he wasn't 18 yet, Hennes was sent to language school in Monterrey, California, where he learned Vietnamese. "I had a choice of doing that or doing dishes. And Old Chuck didn't want to do dishes." Hennes new found language skills would serve him well later on.

Two weeks after his 18th birthday rolled around, Hennes was sent to Vietnam with the 27th Marine Regiment. "I was there four months out in the field and I didn't dive right," Hennes said. Shrapnel from a grenade tore through him. He was medevacked back to base where doctors picked the shrapnel out of him. Hennes was patched up and sent back out; this time with the First Marines, Fourth Regiment, in the demilitarized zone in South Vietnam.

The difference between the two was night and day.

"When we were down in the south, we had the rice patties – just huge – you would spend sometimes hours wading through those things. You can't even imagine how big they are until you see one."

The insurgents would sit in the tree lines waiting for them. "And there were a lot of traps," Hennes said. "When you were south you had a better chance of getting your leg blown off at the knee than getting shot."



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Up North, Hennes said, "you had a better chance of getting shot. We were against NVA (North Vietnam) regulars up there."

Hennes and his men were tasked with patrolling amidst the mountains along the Laotian border. "We pulled patrol all the way to North Vietnam," Hennes said. "That was a fun area. It is eerie, it is dangerous. I thought Jesus; we thought we had it rough with the 27th. I would have gone back to the 27th like nothing. We had casualties so high it was unbelievable. We didn't get sent regular food patrols any more. And we had to patch ourselves up. We just lost that many people."

Hennes said some days they sat on the mountain peaks watching for the North Vietnamese's movements. "That's all we would do for two days," Hennes said. "You just don't let them find you."

During one of those stretches, Hennes and his squad witnessed a mother and baby tiger making their way to the river to get a drink. "One of the guys said, 'Wouldn't this be nice, if we weren't out here trying to kill each other?'" Hennes recalled. "Because we had Bengal tigers running around." Hennes' squad was supposed consist of 15 or 8 men, but Hennes's squad never got that many. "We couldn't get replacements," Hennes said. "We were having firefights almost every other day. You just got used to it. What are you going to do? They ain't going to let ya leave."

Hennes used his ability to speak Vietnamese to get information from the children. "We'd shoot rats for the kids and you'd be the 'number one' Marine," Hennes said. "To them, rats were a delicacy. It was surprising the information you could get from the kids."

Hennes said his squad would find hiding spots; some found by sliding down the face of the

mountain. The guys would find a cave or other place to sit in and hide. "We would sit there for two days with the goal of observing the enemy soldiers," Hennes. "It was so thick with vegetation up there, we had difficulty seeing them. It's just hills and mountain tops. They could have a thousand guys down there and we could have 100 planes fly overhead and you couldn't see them; the canopy was so thick."

For eight months, Hennes and his team didn't shower unless it rained and didn't bathe unless it meant wading through a river; nor did they shave. They were simply focused on staying alive. It was a daunting task; of the 78 guys in Hennes' platoon, one out of three was killed after a single year.

But while they were living, the men grew to depend on one another.

"You were ambushed by night and patrolled by day," Hennes said. "It's the guys I served with who made it worthwhile. They were really the only positive. We spent three years keeping each other alive." Hennes recalled two of the men he was serving with had a choice of spending time in jail, or serving in Vietnam. "I remember one of them saying, 'I could have had three squares (meals) a day and be dry but instead I came to Vietnam.'"

One day the company had the bad luck of running into the NVA while patrolling a valley.

"They tore us apart," Hennes said. "They took eight of us out and only two came back alive."

Hennes was one of them. Badly wounded, he was medevacked out once again. This time his injuries were severe. "My leg was shattered, my pelvis was shattered and my hip was broken," Hennes said. "I spent seven months in the hospital before they said I was stable enough to go home."

He didn't make it home the first time. "I started to bleed on the plane," Hennes said. He was transferred to a hospital in Guam and then got on another plane; this time to Alaska.

"Sure, I got to travel," Hennes said. "I got put on one plane, taken off and then put on another. They did say they would show me the world."

Hennes found himself at Great Lakes Hospital in Illinois; when he was released, he was on crutches and his leg was in a cast. Despite his ordeal, Hennes said he considered going back. "I told them if I did, I wasn't carrying a rifle. But they wanted bodies, so I said no."

That was 1969. "It seems like so long ago, now," Hennes said.

To this day, Hennes said he can't walk across his lawn in his bare feet due to the long-

lasting effects of jungle rot. "It feels like a hundred needles are poking into me," Hennes said.

Hennes turned to alcohol to cope when he reentered civilian life, until he learned he had post traumatic stress disorder and got treatment at a facility in Tomah. "I always felt guilty about losing all those guys," Hennes said. "And I remember our radio guy – his arm was blown off. I had to put a tourniquet on him. No one knows a jar head like another jar head. You lived in absolute misery. You lived like a dog. You slept in the mud."

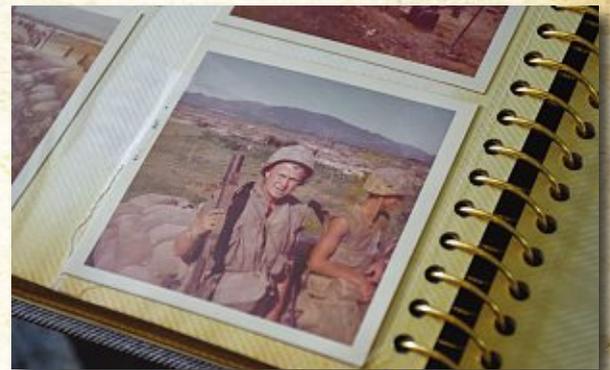
Hennes hasn't had a drink of alcohol in 18 years.

Hennes said his time serving in the military has definitely shaped him into the person he is today. "It's hard to say exactly how," Hennes said. "But I definitely came back different."

For his service, Hennes did receive two Purple Hearts – combat decorations awarded to those wounded by the hands of the enemy – or to the family of a soldier who lost their life in combat.

For Hennes, the medal means something – but not much.

"I could have missed that portion of my life," he said. "I could have done without it." Chuck Hennes passed away on July 21, 2019.



This photo depicts a younger Chuck Hennes in his combat uniform during the Vietnam War.



Marshfield resident Chuck Hennes pictured in his dress blues during his time serving in the U.S. Marines

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