

Copter Pilots: A Special Breed
By Kathi Matthews-Risley

The war in Vietnam changed so many things. It pitted one generation against another. Institutions that were once revered became suspect. More than 58,000 American soldiers lost their lives in the conflict and hundreds of thousands more were injured. Dennis Fisher, long time member of St. John's, was one of the injured. I spoke with Dennis and his wife Betty one beautiful Sunday morning this past summer.

In the early 1970's the military got rid of college deferrment, a practice that kept many young men out of the draft for the war. Dennis wasn't drafted, but he did pull a pretty low number in the lottery, which is what the military turned to to determine who was to be drafted. He knew that one way or another, his future was in the military. So he chose to enlist. He wanted to go to flight school.

He took preliminary flight training at Fort Wolters Texas and advanced training at Fort Rucker Alabama. Three hundred men started the nine month training. Just ninety-two graduated along with Dennis. Three candidates and one instructor died in training.

The 174th missions were assaults, insertions, resupply and medical in Vietnam. His unit flew missions in Laos and South Vietnam. Dennis was very proud that in the four months he was flying helicopters in the war they never lost a soldier onboard his aircraft.

After training he went to Vietnam. He knew his next destination and he was ready to go. He loved what he was trained to do. Betty commented, "Copter pilots were a different breed. They lived on the edge and that's where they liked to be".

After being engaged a year and a half, Dennis married Betty February 14, 1970, before Dennis started flight school. Betty came home to Sauk City when Dennis left for Vietnam. She was just 19. When Dennis came home injured he told her that she didn't have to stay married to him. Her response was "how dare you say that?" That was forty-three years ago. They are still married.

Dennis was in Vietnam from January 1971 to April 1971. His tour of duty was supposed to be for one year. A helicopter crash and his injuries caused in the crash brought him home.

There were many reasons a helicopter would crash: accidents, ordinance malfunctions, surface to air weapons and bullets. In the time Dennis was in Vietnam the unit tried to recover all of their aircraft but more often than not there was nothing left to recover. In fact, Dennis was shot up or shot down a 1/2 dozen times in the four months he was in Vietnam. That's just how dangerous the job was.

Dennis was flying one day in April 1971 when the tail rotor of his helicopter was shot off. The helicopter crashed into the side of a mountain. A tree came crashing through the cargo compartment. The crew all survived but many of the packs were severely injured including Dennis. He was sent home. Dennis received the purple heart, the bronze and silver star for his military service.

He spent five years basically bed ridden. He credits a chiropractor, an old Navy man, for helping him walk again. When he was recovering there was no medical assistance for him. Betty made too much money working as a waitress. Dennis told the chiropractor, "I can't afford to go to you". The response was, "we'll work it out." He got Dennis walking again and he asked only that Dennis and Betty pay what they could at the end of each month. They were very tough times.

Dennis retired permanently from the military in November 1975. He and Betty moved to Black Earth and bought the Black Earth Manor. Dennis did the paperwork. Betty worked the floors. They ran the business for seven years. They have three adult children.

Dennis couldn't talk about the war when he first came home. It was too painful. But he found his voice when he learned that the books in his daughter's history class spent more time talking about Janis Joplin than it did the war in Vietnam.

Dennis and other local vets talk to classes at the high school when they learn about Vietnam. They want students to understand just how valuable freedom is, and to appreciate what those who have served have done.

Dennis' unit was honored October 28 of this year. A helicopter that the 174th had flown in Vietnam was restored and rededicated during a ceremony at the Wisconsin Veteran's Museum in Madison. The event brought many of Dennis' old army buddies together. Some of these men have gotten together often since they returned from war. As Dennis said in an article about the rededication, "There just seems to be some bond in here (his heart). It's like they're your brothers."

Please remember to thank a veteran this and every Veteran's Day. Freedom isn't free. Just ask a vet.