

Combat pilot relives Vietnam War so others may learn

By Kathryn Reed

Leaving college to enlist in the Army. Wanting a change, a new direction, to be a bit defiant and get off the track his parents had laid out. It can happen to any 22-year-old.

The difference is this was 1967. The Vietnam War was raging. Young American men, boys really, were dying every day. The country was divided.

No one thought about supporting the soldiers and not the conflict. Forty-five years ago they were one and the same.



South Lake Tahoe resident Gary Jones looks through a yearbook from infantry training. Photos/Kathryn Reed

This was when protests were the norm on college campuses. It was a time when more people were drafted into the military than willingly walked into a recruiting office.

Gary Jones admits his desire to join the Army and go to flight school was part rebellion. After all, the junior at UC San

Diego wasn't in danger of being drafted.

Today, his life is what is taught in history classes.

This South Lake Tahoe resident has donated memorabilia to the local library that will be on display all month in honor of Nov. 11 being Veterans Day.

While Jones wants to tell his story, the 66-year-old's voice quivers a bit as he relives his last mission over enemy territory. The one that sent him to a hospital in Japan for three months, the one that left him with diminished muscle mass, the one that is the root of his post traumatic distress.

He was with a unit in Cu Chi, a village near the Cambodian border. His job as a light observation helicopter pilot was to fly low to find trails. After a while, Jones could tell how old the trail was, the equipment that had been on it as well as the number of people. He describes it as being like an Indian trail guide.

While a Cobra flew above to be the main firepower, gun battles could not be avoided.

"I took AK47 fire up my right side," Jones tells *Lake Tahoe News*. It went through the seat, into his thigh, off his armored chest plate, bounced off his elbow and exited through his bicep.

"It blew me off the controls," Jones said. "My gunman grabbed the controls and we started to climb."

But this just made the helicopter an easier target. Jones was able to set the chopper in a rice paddy. He looked out and it appeared to be raining. In a way it was – it was raining bullets around the three Americans.

"I could move my arm and leg. Blood was everywhere in the cockpit," Jones said. "I was starting to go into shock. I was saying goofy stuff on the radio."

Medics arrived and he was airlifted out. In Japan, men just like him – those wounded in combat – surrounded Jones. There was a certain camaraderie. It was not until he was back in the States that the survivor's guilt settled in.

He had been writing what he called graphic, truthful letters home. Those stopped just before he was shot. He finished them as he recuperated, which was a cathartic experience.

On the table in his South Lake Tahoe home, a few feet away from where he is sitting, is his Purple Heart medal as well as the Distinguished Flying Cross.

His dress uniform has all the ribbons he earned while serving from December 1967 to March 1971.

It was in 1975 that he moved to Tahoe with his wife. He started as a probation officer. Two years later he joined the Nevada National Guard. In 2002, he retired from the guard. Jones had retired from the El Dorado County District Attorney's Office the preceding year after having been an investigator since 1981.

Sometimes he misses flying and the sense of family the military lifestyle provides.

But Vietnam is never that far away. He is wearing a shirt that says Vietnam Helicopter Pilot Association, Life Member. A model of the helicopter he flew is on a bookshelf. When the traveling Vietnam Wall was in Carson City last weekend he was there. He has the etchings of names of boys he went to high school with, of men he served with and soldiers he witnessed die.

"It's important to talk about it," Jones says of his experience as well as what people today in the military are going through.

ngg_shortcode_0_placeholder (Click on photos to enlarge.)

