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Decades after the war, veterans return to Vietnam to help other vets heal

by PAUL FATTIG (Medford) Mail Tribune

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MEDFORD, Ore. (AP) - When Michael Phillips returned to Medford from Vietnam in 1971, the Army veteran didn't exactly march back into society.

"When I got back, I didn't associate with my family, I didn't join the VFW or anything," he said. "I came close to getting married several times but each time managed to mess it up. I partied a lot, but it was very hard for me to get close to anybody."

"I thought I was invincible because I had survived the war," he said. "But my PTSD was causing severe depression."

In the Army, Phillips was a specialist fourth class who drove in a combat convoy in Vietnam and into Cambodia.

He has been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, which he and counselors say led to drug abuse and homelessness over the years.

He spent two years in therapy for PTSD at the VA's Southern Oregon Rehabilitation Center and Clinics in White City, and it is the reason he is returning to Vietnam on Nov. 3.

"I'm not going back there with a lot of feelings of guilt or anger," he said. "I'm going back there to learn how to help other veterans heal, although I anticipate there will be moments when I have my issues."

Phillips will be among 20 people on the trip, including eight veterans, their spouses and several others with ties to Vietnam or the war.

The trip is the result of Phillips' attending a Soldier's Heart presentation by psychotherapist Ed Tick in Medford in February. Phillips later attended a retreat for veterans on Orca Island in Puget Sound conducted by Tick, known for helping veterans with PTSD. He leads groups of veterans back to Vietnam each year.

"During the retreat, I told Dr. Tick I wanted to go back as part of my healing process," Phillips said.

The group will fly to Ho Chi Minh City, known as Saigon during the war. From there, they will spend a few days in the Mekong Delta, then head to the Central Highlands, north to Danang, then travel to

Hue and finally take a train to Hanoi. They are scheduled to return Nov. 23.

Veterans Day - Nov. 11 - will find them in Danang for the dedication of an infirmary named after an American who died in Vietnam during the war.

"We'll have lunch with some former Viet Cong and North Vietnamese troops," he said.

"I had nothing but respect for my enemies," he said. "I don't feel guilty for anything I did over there."

Phillips says the waiting has brought back a flood of memories.

"I'm excited and I'm apprehensive," he said. "You name the emotion, I've felt it in the past couple of weeks."

Phillips dropped out of college to join the Army, and spent all of 1970 and the first part of 1971 in South Vietnam.

"I extended in Vietnam in order to get an early out," he said of an early discharge upon returning to the states.

He was based at Long Binh, just northeast of what was then Saigon.

"We drove combat convoys that went to fire support bases," he said. "Our company was responsible primarily for hauling ammo but we hauled a lot of other stuff - rations, beer, soda, your basic toiletry supplies.

"We would put on our flak jackets, get into our trucks and drive through Charlie (Viet Cong) country," he added. "Some days we would drive through some incredibly beautiful countryside, on others we went through horrific scenes where Charlie had been in some village the night before and killed all the individuals in power and lay them along the road as a warning."

On some days they would lose a truck when they were hit by enemy small arms fire or mortars, he said.

At one point, he was also a member of a "trail party," which followed convoys to repair and protect vehicles that broke down and had to be left behind.

A photograph of a smiling Phillips shows him standing by the front of a truck in GI gear with accessories that included a head band, peace sign and an MIA bracelet. He is pointing to an indentation left by a round in the bumper.

A note on the back side of the original indicates he was only three miles from Cambodia.

"That's where I didn't go," he said with a grin. "And this other photo was taken at a fire support base about four miles inside Cambodia where I never was."

The U.S. military was never officially in Cambodia, he observed, then added that he definitely was in Cambodia.

He remembers being airlifted by helicopter out of Cambodia with malaria.

"That whole experience is basically a blur," he said. "I can remember incoming fire. I remember one of the guys from my company from Atlanta - he carried me to a medivac chopper in a monsoon."

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