

- David Van Landschoot



“I know my stuff and I was taught well by the people I was with. I was flown back to Long Bien, took a shower, got cleaned up, put on fresh clothes and I go before another promotion board. So now I’m a crew chief, an E-6, in less than a year and a-half, being drafted, with no special schooling and on-the-job training. Vietnam was a place to make rank in a hurry, or get killed.”

These words were offered to me during a recent Veterans History Project interview with David Van Landschoot.

Dave was born in February 1946 in Superior. His father, Tony, worked as train master and his mother, Thelma, taught grade school. He had four siblings, with a brother and sister on each side of him age-wise. He laughed as he said that all of the stories that are told about the middle child are true. Dave graduated from Superior East High School in 1964 and enrolled at the University of Wisconsin-Superior to study biology and history.

At the time, all eligible males 18 years and older were required to register with the Selective Service system. All men 19 to 26 years old were eligible to be drafted. Students attending college full-time could request an exemption, which could be extended as long as they were in good standing and verified their status with the registrar.

Dave was a student with a 2-S deferment and earned enough credits to graduate, but was missing one specific class. He was enrolled in graduate school, but in June 1968, at the end of his fourth year of college, he received his pre-induction notice. He was at home when he opened the letter that said “Greetings, you are hereby ordered for induction into the United States Army.” Dave said, “That settles that, that is where I’m going to go. I’m a law-abiding citizen and I will do my duty.”

The road to Vietnam

His mother was terrified and turned white as she witnessed this event. Plenty of bad news had been reported about Vietnam at the time: the Tet Offensive, the siege of Khe Sanh, the terrible incident at My Lai and reports that over 14,000 Americans were killed in action in 1968. When his father was presented with the news of his induction he simply said, "Be a good soldier." On Sept. 9, 1968, Dave traveled from Minneapolis, through St. Louis, and ended up at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, for basic training.

Dave did not want to be in his situation, but he decided to do his best. He scored very well on the induction test and with his educational background he was told he should be an officer. Weighing his options and the increased time commitment to the military, he declined officer training.

Dave adjusted easily in the transition from civilian to military life. He didn't consider himself a "goer and doer" in basic training, but performed well in all aspects of early military life, including military courtesy and marksmanship. He rated in the top 10 percent in the five aspects of physical training and this earned him a 48-hour pass to visit Nashville.

After eight weeks of basic training, Dave found himself in the top tier of his class. His commanding officer offered the opportunity to attend non-commissioned officer (NCO) training. Dave understood that becoming an NCO was a guarantee to get deployed to Vietnam. With a big smile and a chuckle, he said he was dreaming when he asked for Iceland as his next duty station, as it was as far as possible from Vietnam. He proceeded to tell his captain, "I will do whatever is asked to the best of my ability, but I will not volunteer for anything extra."

The Field Artillery Training Center at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, was Dave's duty station for the next eight weeks. He categorized his advanced individual training (AIT) as excellent. He said, "They knew exactly what they were doing to make us cannoneers." At that point his marching days were over and his time was split between the classroom and field training as he learned how to maintain and shoot the Howitzer M 101 A-1. His early training did not make him feel he was ready for Vietnam, but he was part of an army.

There was no graduation ceremony when Dave's unit completed AIT. At the end of a training session they were ordered to stand in rank and file. The soldiers were told to disperse as groups: officer training, NCOs, the guy who played French horn (who attended Julliard School of Music was transferred to the military band in Washington, D.C.), and those remaining packed up and were sent to Vietnam. Because he was at the top of his class, Dave received another accelerated promotion to PFC E-3 before arriving in Vietnam. This promotion helped him move up a ladder he didn't want to be on.

On Feb. 4, 1969, Dave found himself on a modified 707 airplane with about 200 other soldiers in Oklahoma City. From there they flew to Fort Ord, California, to Anchorage and then Yokota Air Base in Japan. Strangely, and without explanation, they were sequestered in a Quonset hut and were held there under guard. Finally, they arrived in Bien Hoa Air Base in Vietnam and Dave's first impression was "it was really hot and it really stinks."

A week-long orientation and acclimation program included issuance of M-16 rifles, additional gear and basic infantry information. Dave was then assigned to Delta Battery, 2nd Battalion, 40th Field Artillery, 199th Light Infantry Brigade. His main base was at Long Binh, but he spent little time there.

Delta Battery was a small group of two to six guns, sometimes with infantry soldiers to secure the perimeter. Dave said for safety reasons he preferred to be flown into his location rather than be transported by truck. Since they were an air mobile unit they were always surrounded in the field. In May 1969, after receiving a few days training on the M 102 at Long Binh, he said he was sent back out. When I asked about “back out,” he said most often they never really knew where they were located. He detailed several of the situations he experienced and then stated, “Whatever we weren’t, we were outstanding cannoneers.”

One anecdote occurred at Camp Frenzell-Jones, which was a heavy artillery battery that was being mortared. Because of their situation and particular weaponry, the soldiers in camp were unable to effectively return fire in order to fend off the enemy. Dave and his battery were flown in, were laughed at and were asked, “Where’d you get the toy guns?” When the enemy mortars rained in, and the smaller weapons were able to shoot back and repel the enemy, the laughing stopped.

Dave also shared the visit of Brigadier General William Ross Bond to his duty station. General Bond and his entourage landed in a helicopter at the fire support base. Some in General Bond’s group were belittling the appearance of Dave and the others in his battery because they were not neat, parade ground appearing, soldiers.

General Bond was well aware of the situation, but those who flew in with him soon realized they were in thick jungle in every direction, with the enemy closely surrounding their location. Dave said, “They moved and huddled up like chickens against the chopper.” Keeping his thoughts to himself, Dave knew they would not last a day in the situation his battery was in. He thought they should “go back to their air-conditioned bunker with their whiskey and cigars.” Dave smiled when he said he was really envious of the whiskey and cigars since his battery didn’t have any comforts in the field.

After one night of shooting 600 rounds, hundreds of enemy encounters and two promotion boards, Dave knew he was close to reaching the end of his commitment. He realized that although he was an excellent field combatant, he would not be good as a garrison soldier. He made calculations and extended his commitment by 70 days. At the end of that extended commitment he was eligible to be discharged.

The re-up NCO looked at Dave’s file and said, “You have no intention of re-upping, do you? OK, have a good life, enjoy.” With 437 days in country, a multitude of experiences, and 25 pounds lighter, it was time for SSG E-6 David J. Van Landschoot to go home. On April 17, 1970, he waited in the manifest formation at Tan Son Nhut Air Base for two days and was sent back to the United States.

Life back home

Dave's family was thrilled to have him home, but in general, his reception in the U.S. was not a warm one. He cited several instances in which he was snubbed, was not made welcome, or was ridiculed for being a soldier.

Trying to settle into civilian life, Dave took the one class he lacked in order to get his degree and graduate from UW-Superior. He went to graduate school as previously planned and got married. He was leading a very busy life, working as a locomotive engineer and attending school. With 27 credits toward his master's degree, he realized something was wrong and that something would now be categorized as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). He recognizes he made a big mistake, but in the midst of an extremely tense situation with a professor, he walked away from his graduate training with one class remaining.

We discussed PTSD, how it started and manifested itself in Dave. The fact that most of the action his battery faced was at night, he was sleep deprived and stated, "Combat is not normal" and "the unknown is unsafe." He experienced a hyper-alertness, was quick to anger and realized a mistake in the field could lead to a soldier's death. He stated when he got home there was no help offered and there was nobody for him to talk to about PTSD until 10 years ago.

We took plenty of time to reflect on his overall experience in the military. He mentioned he learned about multi-culturalism. His battery consisted of a Native American, a Hispanic, a guy from Guam, a couple of African Americans and a couple of whites. They were all good soldiers and worked well together on the gun crew, it didn't matter who they were or where they were from.

Dave retired as a locomotive engineer in 2006 and a year later moved to Hayward. He was still coping with PTSD when he met Paul Pedersen, who was also a combat veteran. Paul took Dave under his wing. Slowly, with the help of Paul, the Veterans Service Office in Hayward and the community of Hayward, Dave realized he was not the only one dealing with this problem. Over time, with the help of therapy and sharing his experience and feelings with others, he understands the common thread many soldiers experience.

Dave stated he had a wonderful experience with the native population at a Pow Wow at Lac Courte Oreilles (LCO). At the first Pow Wow he attended he discovered all entry buttons were sold out, but the person behind the counter gave her button to him. Despite his effort to not accept it, she persisted, saying, "Take it as a gift." Dave said it was the first token he received as a welcome-home gift presented for his service in Vietnam. He was impressed by the grand entry of the Pow Wow in which all veterans were honored for their service.

Dave mentioned positive aspects of his military training, stating, "It teaches multi-culturalism, discipline, responsibility and learning not to be too quick to judge other people." He stated those in Congress need to learn the lesson of how to work with others, despite their differences. He thought his biggest achievement was the fact that he trained several soldiers who later became crew chiefs by applying Dave's guidance into action.

David Van Landschoot is a life member of the Vietnam Veterans of America; whose focus is to never allow one generation of soldiers forget another. He urges all soldiers to get help by talking about their experiences using any one of the options that are currently available.

In Nov. 2018 he was awarded a Quilt of Valor at the Hayward High School Veterans Day concert.

Dave and his wife, Patty, have been married 48 years and live in Hayward.

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