Vietnam Veteran Builds Bridge to New Generation of 5/7th Soldiers

In 1970, Jim Carson began a tour of duty in Vietnam with the U.S. Army’s 5/7th (5th Battalion, 7th Cavalry). The following year, the 5/7th received stand down orders and began preparing for its return to America, setting in motion a chain of events which culminated on January 5, 2005. On that day, after more than 33 years, Jim completed a personal journey that bridged the 5/7th’s past with its present.

The 5/7th traces back to 1866, when the 7th Cavalry Regiment was organized at Ft. Riley, Kansas – with “Garry Owen” as its marching song. This was the same cavalry that was led by George Armstrong Custer at Little Big Horn in 1876. It is also the cavalry that from 1966-71 was one of the most decorated in Vietnam – with four Medal of Honor recipients. (Since Viet Nam, there have been only three Medals of Honor awarded – two for Somalia and one, in April, for Iraq.)

Nowhere to Be Found

The 5/7th was to be retired as a unit, with Jim Carson serving as color guard commander. The colors of both the 5/7th and United States were to be displayed during nationally-televised stand down ceremonies at Bien-Hoa Army Base (where they were stationed) near Saigon. Once in the United States, the colors would be retired at a ceremony in Ft. Lewis, Washington.

Before the ceremony, Jim discovered that the colors – the battalion flag, battle streamers, headquarters company guidon (a small pennant), and the U.S. colors – were missing from his office.

“As long as I live, I will never forget the sick feeling I had in the pit of my stomach,” recalled Jim. “These were the colors that had accompanied the very first 5/7th Garry Owen troopers to Vietnam in 1966. They represented hardship, pain, suffering, and all the 5/7th troopers who had been lost.

“I was panicked,” he added. “I had to have the colors – our colors.”

Jim initiated a concerted effort to find them. Army headquarters began checking every piece of luggage and mail leaving Vietnam. He personally called every piece of luggage and mail leaving them. Army headquarters began checking Army’s 5/7th (5th Battalion, 7th Cavalry) with Jim Carson serving as color guard commander when Carson-Mitchell (where he is now vice president) in 1971. He was a captain at the time he left active duty to join Carson-Mitchell where he is now vice president in 1971. He was a captain when he retired from the Army in 1976.

Yet during the 33 years since leaving Vietnam, he had always felt that his duty as a platoon leader in A Co. He was a first lieutenant at the time he left active duty to join Carson-Mitchell where he is now vice president in 1971. He was a captain when he retired from the Army in 1976.

Vietnam veteran Jim Carson (in blue cap, holding the battalion flag) transfers the colors of the U.S. Army’s 5/7th to LtCol Jody Petrie during deployment ceremonies at Ft. Stewart, Georgia.

Meanwhile, Jim received the battle streamers. He now had a flag, but the painted canvas was stiff, so the flag would not hang properly. Even so, the flag proved adequate for the ceremony at Bien-Hoa.

Ironically, after the ceremony, Jim got solid information that their colors were in the possession of a sergeant major, the top of the enlisted ranks. Jim contacted the sergeant major’s commanding general (CG), who ordered the sergeant major to have the colors returned in not more than 15 minutes – lest he return home a private first class.

A jeep arrived just a few minutes later. (Jim can still see it sliding to a stop in a cloud of red dust.) Out jumped a soldier carrying a brown paper bundle containing the missing colors.

The CG of Bien-Hoa Army Base had been aware of this saga every step of the way, and when the colors were returned to Jim, the CG informed him that when he (Jim) got to Ft. Lewis, he was obligated to turn in a set of colors to the Army, and that he should use his own judgement which set to turn in. Jim did just that, keeping the original colors in his possession.

Jim had begun his tour in Vietnam as a platoon leader in A Co. He was a first lieutenant at the time he left active duty to join Carson-Mitchell (where he is now vice president) in 1971. He was a captain when he retired from the Army in 1976.

To ensure he would have the colors in time for the ceremony at Bien-Hoa, Jim went to the headquarters of the 2/7th (their sister battalion just a few miles away) to take a color photo of their flag, which was virtually the same in appearance as the 5/7th’s flag.

At the same time, he discovered that, due to wear and tear on the 5/7th’s existing (now lost) colors, a new set of colors and battle streamers had been ordered by Washington, D.C. He contacted the manufacturer and learned that the battle streamers – but not the battalion colors – would be ready in time for Bien-Hoa.

Jim requested that the battle streamers be sent to the Bien-Hoa Army Base and that the battalion colors be sent to the latter ceremony in Ft. Lewis, where they would be sure to arrive in time.

“My next move was to make a set of battalion colors that would get us through the in country ceremony,” said Jim. “That was no small task.”

With the help of a Vietnamese woman, Jim purchased some canvas. He commissioned an artist to paint the front and back of an American bald eagle (depicted on the battalion colors) on separate pieces of canvas, and had a local tailor sew a flag. The pieces were then applied to each side of the flag.

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Yet during the 33 years since leaving Vietnam, he had always felt that his duty as a 5/7th color guard commander was incomplete. He still wanted to place the colors “into the hands of the current Garry Owens troopers to whom they mean so much,” he said.

Mission Accomplished

The perfect chance presented itself last fall, when Jim learned not only that the 5/7th had been reactivated and was training for deployment to Iraq, but that Maurice Edmonds, a retired two-star
Building a Bridge

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general whom he had served under when Edmonds was a lieutenant colonel in Vietnam, was serving as president of their Veterans Association. Jim called Gen Edmonds and expressed his desire to present the colors to the new 5/7th.

This past January 5, Jim, his wife Ginny, and about 40 Vietnam veterans flew to Ft. Stewart, Georgia (near Savannah), to present the colors to the reactivated unit. Jim carried the battalion flag, the battle streamers, the guidon, and the U.S. colors with him on the plane.

At the Ft. Stewart ceremony, a 5/7th veteran handed the colors to Jim, who gave them to the new Battalion Commander, LtCol Jody Petrie. LtCol Petrie handed them to his current sergeant major, Daryl Webster, and the transition was complete.

Among those present at the ceremony were two former battalion commanders who had retired as general officers, and Capt James M. Sprayberry, one of the four 5/7th troopers who had received a Medal of Honor for his actions in Vietnam.

After the ceremony, the soldiers had so many questions for the veterans that after spending nearly an hour visiting on the parade grounds, they headed to the headquarters building for a reception, where they continued to visit for another hour or more, said Jim. The 5/7th departed for Iraq a few days later.

“It clearly meant a lot to these young soldiers for a bunch of old veterans to show up for their deployment ceremony,” said Jim. “They were visibly moved and appreciative to have the colors that flew above soldiers from an earlier time. They took those colors with them to Iraq as a connection between the generations. For the older veterans like me,” he added, “the ceremony represented closure.” ▲