

Love of Learning Remembering David Styles on Vietnam Veterans Memorial Day

Combat medics reflect on their memories of Styles and share details of that tragic day in Vietnam

by Eric Niemann

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The images of war in Ukraine are tough to watch. Missiles are targeting maternity wards and kindergartens. Cities are being reduced to ashes. Tanks are advancing. Refugees are fleeing. The pictures of war tell a sad tale.

These images on television look similar to those from almost 50 years ago during the Vietnam War which took place in the late '60s and early '70s. Our nation sent over 2.7 million men and women to Southeast Asia to fight communism over a 12-year stretch. More than 58,000 of them never made it back home. Their names are listed on the Vietnam Veterans War Memorial in Washington D.C.

We must never forget them!

March 29 is Vietnam Veterans Memorial Day as proclaimed separately by both presidents Obama and Trump. March 29, 1973, was the date that all remaining U.S. forces serving in combat roles were withdrawn from Vietnam. In memory of this significant date, "Love of Learning" will focus on three combat medics who served together in the Americal Division in Vietnam.

One of the medics is Spc. David Styles from Philomath. Coincidentally, he was killed in action on March 29, 1969, four years to the day prior to when U.S. combat troops were ordered to withdraw.

David graduated with the Class of 1966 from Philomath High School and was classmates with Paul "Jeffrey" Cochran. Larry Gassner was a year behind them and graduated PHS in 1967. None of them could possibly have ever known when they graduated from PHS that they would years later be reunited and memorialized together forever on the Vietnam Wall.

The son of Bud and Mae Styles who lived on Seventh Street in Philomath, David was drafted in April 1968. He was sent to basic training and received advanced medical training at Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio, Texas before deploying to South Vietnam on Oct. 15, 1968. He did not want to go to Vietnam. Our government told him he had to go. That is how the selective service worked at the time.

David was assigned as a medical Specialist Four to 2nd Platoon, Company D, 3rd Battalion, 1st Infantry Regiment, 11th Infantry Brigade, Americal Division. The Americal Division was formed out of an existing American military presence in South Vietnam called Task Force Oregon. David was assigned with fellow medics Spc. Greg Jackson from

Houston, Texas, and Spc. Bob Lombardo from New Haven, Connecticut. All three men had been drafted and subsequently trained to serve roles as combat medics.

Greg recalled that “virtually all of us were draftees and didn’t want to be there, but we all believed we had an obligation to serve our country.”

According to Bob and Greg, there were about four medics to a company — one for each platoon plus one for the company command group. “He was called the “Chief Quack.” Every once in a while, both Greg and Bob had to assume these duties.

In October 1968, Greg had just been pulled up out of 2nd platoon to become the “Head Quack.” David Styles replaced Greg as the combat medic assigned to 2nd Platoon. Bob Lombardo was the medic assigned to 4th Platoon. The other medic in Delta Company was Vaughn Van De Meer. He was the medic for 1st Platoon.

Both Greg and Bob reflected on their memories of David Styles. Greg shared, “In our time in the field, I had numerous conversations with David — he was my buddy. He was an excellent medic and well-liked by his men. Like all of us, he missed home and family. ... He also talked of how beautiful Oregon was.”

Bob shared: “Dave and I hung out when we were at our base when not on patrol. We would talk about home and our families.”

The title “Doc” is earned not given. Combat medics had to prove their mettle in the field to earn the trust of the soldiers in their assigned platoons. They had to demonstrate their medical skill proficiency by treating the wounded before they would ever be affectionately called “Doc.”

The point man in David’s platoon was Spc. 4 Thomas Connelly, an infantryman who was drafted from Charleston, South Carolina. He shared that “Doc Styles was a real likable guy” and added that he “liked to crack jokes while he was sticking needles into you.” He also mentioned that Doc Styles was “helping cross-train other members of the platoon how to administer IVs.”

Unbeknownst to David, he helped prepare his platoon to save lives on one of the worst days ahead. On March 29, 1969, Delta Company was reconning a series of tunnels 10 miles west of Landing Zone Bronco in Quang Ngai Province located in South Vietnam.

The members of Delta Company initially made enemy contact and were fired upon by a North Vietnamese Army soldier located in one of the tunnels. A fellow infantryman from 4th Platoon was unexpectedly hit by enemy fire. Bob Lombardo rushed forward to aid this mortally wounded soldier.

Meanwhile, the enemy soldier, who was wounded in the same action, jumped out of his tunnel and ran away.

In order to maintain rapid pursuit of the wounded enemy soldier, 2nd Platoon, the one David Styles was now assigned to, was ordered to “leapfrog” 4th Platoon as Bob Lombardo treated the dying soldier.

As 2nd Platoon advanced, led by Lt. Jim Claybaugh from Caldwell, Idaho, followed closely by Radio Telephone Operator Mike Wilkins from Portland, as well as Combat Medic Styles moved into a clearing in a rice paddy where a North Vietnamese Army battalion-sized ambush was waiting to pull the trigger.

The enemy ambush opened up with an overpowering barrage of small arms fire and rocket-propelled grenades. All three soldiers from this platoon command group were mortally wounded in the initial volley during a vicious firefight that would last the rest of the day.

All told, five Delta soldiers were killed in action on March 29 and countless others were wounded. Some soldiers were medevaced that day while others stayed in place.

That night, the rest of Delta Company hunkered into a defensive posture called a “night logger position.” Nighttime in Vietnam was eerie and uncomfortable.

The following day the surviving members of Delta Company would emerge from their defensive positions to recover David along with the other fallen men and place them on medevac helicopters often referred to in Vietnam as a “Dust-Off.” The Huey choppers would return David and other casualties back to their forward-operating base for medical treatment, graves registration or transport home.

“My biggest regret is for the guys like David and all the guys who didn’t make it back and paid the ultimate price.” SPC. Greg Jackson

Spcs. Bob Lombardo, Greg Jackson and Thomas Connelly were all wounded during the same combat action on March 29. David, Greg, Bob and Thomas each received the Purple Heart, which is awarded to those who are killed or wounded in combat. It is noteworthy that all three of the medics earned the Army Combat Medical Badge, which is awarded to soldiers performing medical duties while being engaged by the enemy.

Thomas, meanwhile, received the coveted Combat Infantryman’s Badge for serving as an infantryman during active ground combat.

Greg shared: “As I look back now, I believe our political leaders didn’t serve us well and made errors in judgment. I am proud of my service. My biggest regret is for the guys like David and all the guys who didn’t make it back and paid the ultimate price.”

Bob said “I still think of that day in March. I play it in my head a lot due to what happened that day — Dave’s platoon advanced instead of mine, since I had to tend to a dead soldier because of an ambush which started the whole chain of events that day. I felt a lot of guilt of why he didn’t make it. ... somehow I made it. That day still stays with me.”

Bob added, “We are told that everyone making it back should live the best way they can. When it’s our time to go, all the ones on the wall will want to talk to us and see how we did, and how we tried to do good things in our lives.

“I’m sure Dave will be one of them.”

When a soldier dies in combat, they leave behind a Gold Star Family that is left fighting their own emotional battle with grief. They are left with questions. Why did this happen? How did this happen? Why did he have to go? David's parents, Bud and Mae Styles, wrestled with these questions for the remainder of their lives.

Peggy (Styles) Neville, David's younger sister, also struggled with this grief. She was a senior at PHS in the class of 1969 and just two months shy from graduation when this happened. It was impossible for her to feel the excitement of an upcoming prom or pending graduation when she just lost a brother unexpectedly in combat. David and Peggy were close.

Meanwhile, David's little brother, Dale Styles, was just a freshman in 1969 at PHS as a member of the Class of 1972. He shared this reflection this past week.

"I miss my big brother that I hardly got time to know. David loved to draw pictures and I recall wishing I could draw like him. Today, I paint oil paintings and often think of my brother while painting pictures."

The images of the Vietnam War are bleak. We must never forget them and those who served during this time. I would offer, however, that like Dale, we must all work together toward creating more colorful tomorrows.

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