

## Wreaths about keeping memories alive

By Kurt Hildebrand

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After traveling 8,000 miles from Minden, driving through the countryside and walking a mile through the jungle, Johnson Lane resident Jeff Evans found a memorial at the site where his Uncle David died more than 56 years ago.

Evans described his trek to locate where his uncle and father were killed during the Vietnam War as keynote speaker at Wreaths Across America conducted at Eastside Memorial Park in Minden on Saturday morning.

The annual event included the Douglas High School Jr. ROTC cadets posting the colors. Carson Valley Middle School National Jr. Honor Society members led the Pledge of Allegiance.

Evans is a gold star son, nephew and brother, who just returned from visiting the places where his uncle and father died in Vietnam.

Spec. 4 David Evans was a door gunner on a rescue helicopter with 117th Assault Helicopter Company that was shot down Oct. 24, 1968, in Long An Province, Vietnam.

“As the helicopter was shot down, my uncle stayed on the machine gun and provided cover fire for the soldiers who had escaped,” he said. “I have been in contact for quite a few years with one of the soldiers, who survived that day due to my uncle’s bravery.”

The journey to find those spotstook him through the bureaucratic jungles of U.S. government archives.

“We received a lot of manilla envelopes in the mail with all the information I ever wanted, except the information I wanted,” he said of his search for information about where the two brothers died. “Finally, I found an old Vietnam vet, who worked with someone in the National Archives Museum.”

That discovery led to a two-week trip to Vietnam that wrapped up on Friday.

The visit to where his uncle made his final stand led through the Vietnamese countryside.

“That was difficult to find because the quadrant we had was in actual jungle,” he said. “We drove and drove and drove, and as we kept driving the roads kept getting skinnier and skinnier.”

As snow blew sideways outside of the Eastside’s packed hall, Evans described traveling through the wet, swampy terrain until they came upon an open spot with a handful of houses.

“Standing there staring at that field, trying to replay that in my brain, was a completely surreal moment,” he said. “You don’t see a lot of Americans in that part of the world walking around in the jungle.”

The locals to walked out and asked what was happening as Evans, his wife, two sons and daughter-in-law stood in a place so far from home.

“One of the people who walked out was probably an 80-85 year-old woman,” he said. “And this is where the story gets really crazy. I asked our interpreter to ask her if she was here in 1968?”

It turns out she was there and remembered the firefight and the crash that killed Evans’ uncle.

“I’ve been looking and looking for this spot, and to have someone who was there and remembered it, and could point me right to it...” he said. “She then asked the interpreter ‘Hey, have you guys seen the memorial?’”

The memorial was built for the Vietnamese soldiers who were there.

“But on the video, the interpreter says it was also built for an American soldier,” Evans said. “He goes ‘that’s got to be your uncle.’”

The search for where his father was killed near Can Tho in the Mekong Delta was not quite as dramatic, Evans said.

Spec. 6 Norman Evans was killed in a Nov. 24, 1970, mid-air collision over an island not too far from the air base there.

The family got into a boat and made their way to the island.

“We didn’t have a machete, and we didn’t have bug spray,” he said. “We got to a spot, where our guide says it’s just there, but we have to start being careful of snakes. I look down and I’m wearing shorts, and my legs were covered with ants. There’s no way we’re making it with five people.”

That’s when Evans concluded his journey had reached its destination.

“So I told him, ‘You know what? I’m good,’” he said. “This is where my dad died. It was green, as beautiful a green as you can get. We stood there for quite a while. I’m 56 years old. My dad died when I was 2.”

Evans spoke to the Jr. ROTC and middle school students in the audience.

“There are a lot of kids here today,” the former Douglas High School teacher and coach said. “Your job is to carry this on, carry it forward. Don’t let people forget. Tell stories. Tell my story. Tell stories that you hear. Don’t forget, so you can tell them to your kids and your kids can tell them to their kids. It’s something that has to continue on and on and on.”

Before volunteers stepped out into the weather to place wreaths, Eastside co-owner Nadia Sandoval talked about what the event was about.

“Each wreath is a gift of appreciation from a grateful American,” she said. “These wreaths celebrate our honor to those who have served and are serving in the armed services.”

She said that it’s important people understand that freedom comes from sacrifice.

“To our children we want you to understand that freedoms that you enjoy today have not been free but have come with a cost that you some day may have to pay yourself,” she said.

Wreaths were also distributed at Garden Cemetery in Gardnerville despite the blustery weather, Main Street Program Director Jen Tune said.

“We had Assemblyman Ken Gray in attendance,” she said. “He spoke and also represented the Air Force in this year’s ceremony. Mike Olson did a stellar job MC’ing the ceremony. We had the Army National Guard out of Reno for the Veterans’ honors, and our local cadets from Douglas High ROTC also participated.”