

VETERAN'S CORNER

Tualatin Marine severely injured in Vietnam Khe Sanh Battle, Became National Commander of Disabled American Veterans

BY DALE POTTS

In 1968, America believed that we would easily win the Vietnam war. However, early that year, the Vietnamese announced a seven-day cease-fire for the end of January to celebrate Tet, the Vietnamese New Year. But instead, on January 31, North Vietnamese and Viet Cong military launched the Tet Offensive against major South Vietnam cities. The resulting TV coverage of these fierce battles turned public opinion against the war. It was a shock to learn that the war was not going as well as being told by our military and political leaders.

Earlier, on January 21, to divert American attention and military away from populated areas, North Vietnamese forces began massive artillery bombardment of the U.S. remote Marine camp at Khe Sanh. Tualatin resident Bradley Barton was a Marine Corporal at Khe Sanh when the attack began. He joined the Marines at age 19 after passing draft physical. He qualified as a rifle sharpshooter before sent to Vietnam. At Khe Sanh, he was in charge of secret and classified material with orders to burn them with a phosphorous grenade if the base was overrun. On February 29, the 38th day of the battle, he was working in a tent that he shared with the Chaplain. He heard a thump, followed by a tremendous explosion from a 155 howitzer in front of his tent. It was a mortar from a North Vietnamese Army howitzer. He felt like he had been whacked hard in the back by a baseball bat and fell forward. For a while, he felt detached from his body and watched himself fall in "slow motion" to the ground. Laying on his right side, he couldn't move. When he saw a huge puddle of blood under him, he believed he was dead. His entire life flashed before him and he prayed to God "if I die, take me with you". Blood continued flowing out of his wounds, gushing with each heartbeat.

The Chaplain was in shock. Bradley yelled "get down". Then he asked for corpsmen. Two came. They packed Bradley's back with bandages, log rolled him onto a stretcher and then off at nearby Aide Station. He was yelling and screaming because of tremendous pain. The Navy doctor told him "shut up, you are a Marine and you can take it." Bradley was advised to keep his dog tags with him, adding "you didn't know who you were after you were hit." Bradley was helicoptered to Da Nang. As his nurse anesthetized him there, he remembers thinking she looked like an Angel. His spinal cord had been severed and his left lung had collapsed. In surgery, his spine was fused, left lung re-inflated, and spleen and two-thirds of a kidney removed. Afterwards, found he couldn't move his

legs. When he asked his nurse if his condition was temporary, she cried and said it was permanent.

He was next airlifted to Japan. His older brother flew there at his own expense to provide critical morale support. He was scheduled for Walter Reed when medevac'd to the states for rehabilitation. But his brother intervened. Instead Bradley went to a VA hospital 30 miles from his home town

where he learned how to take care of himself. After earning a business degree with emphasis in accounting from Indiana University, he had difficulty getting a job. He asked one employer why he wasn't hired and was told "because you are in a wheelchair, our clients will not like you". Employers felt that their customers would feel uncomfortable dealing with a handicapped person. After interviewing with all the Big Eight accounting firms with no success, a partner in one told him about a client who did hire him. He eventually became a VA

Vocational Rehabilitation Specialist for NW Indiana. He excelled there and was named "1979 Handicapped Hoosier of the Year." That year, two time Academy Award winner Harold Russell who lost both hands in WWII, chaired the President's Committee on the Employment of the Handicapped that year. Even at that event, he encountered discrimination when a waitress told his group to "push him out of the way".

Bradley graduated from law school in 1982 and practiced law in Indiana before moving to California to clerk with the San Diego County Probate Court. He came to Oregon in 1993 to help veterans. He is thankful to be alive and not traumatized by his Vietnam experience. In 2006, he served as National Commander of Disabled Veterans of America. He advises other handicapped in wheelchairs that you can do everything you normally do in life, except it is in a wheelchair. He reminds everyone that "In war, there are no unwounded soldiers." which is inscribed on the American Veteran Disabled for Life Memorial in Washington, DC.

Dale G. Potts has organized and MC'd Tualatin's Memorial Day observation for the past 13 years. He is a Navy Vietnam vet, serving as the Public

Affairs Officer of the Aircraft Carrier USS Yorktown. After active duty, he remained in the reserves, retiring as a Navy Captain (same rank as an Army Colonel). His civilian career was primarily as the Oregon Public Affairs Officer for IRS. Contact Dale at vet.dale@gmail.com.



Lieutenant Dale Potts



Corporal Barton stepping out of tent where he was wounded.



Headquarters tent for Bradley's unit.



Marines defending Khe Sanh camp.



North Vietnamese shelling Khe Sanh air strip.



Purple Heart recipient Bradley Barton and wife Donna.



From a robust 208 pound Marine, after surgery and rehabilitation, Bradley weighed 128 pounds.



Khe Sanh buddy, Michael Smith, on left, who Bradley did not see again until 2010 at Vietnam War Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC.



Corporal Barton at Khe Sanh Marine Base. (3 photos above)