

MORE NEWS AT WWW.IOWALIVINGMAGAZINES.COM

Grimes

november 2012

50111

Living

War stories

VETERANS SHARE THEIR
WAR-TIME EXPERIENCES

**DESIRE TO GIVE
FAITH**

**MEET STEPHANIE SCHULTES
EDUCATION**

PRSR1 STD
ECRWSS
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
BIG GREEN UMBRELLA
POSTAL CUSTOMER
BIG GREEN UMBRELLA
414 61st Street
Des Moines, IA 50312

War stories

VETERANS SHARE THEIR WAR-TIME EXPERIENCES

By Ashley Rullestad

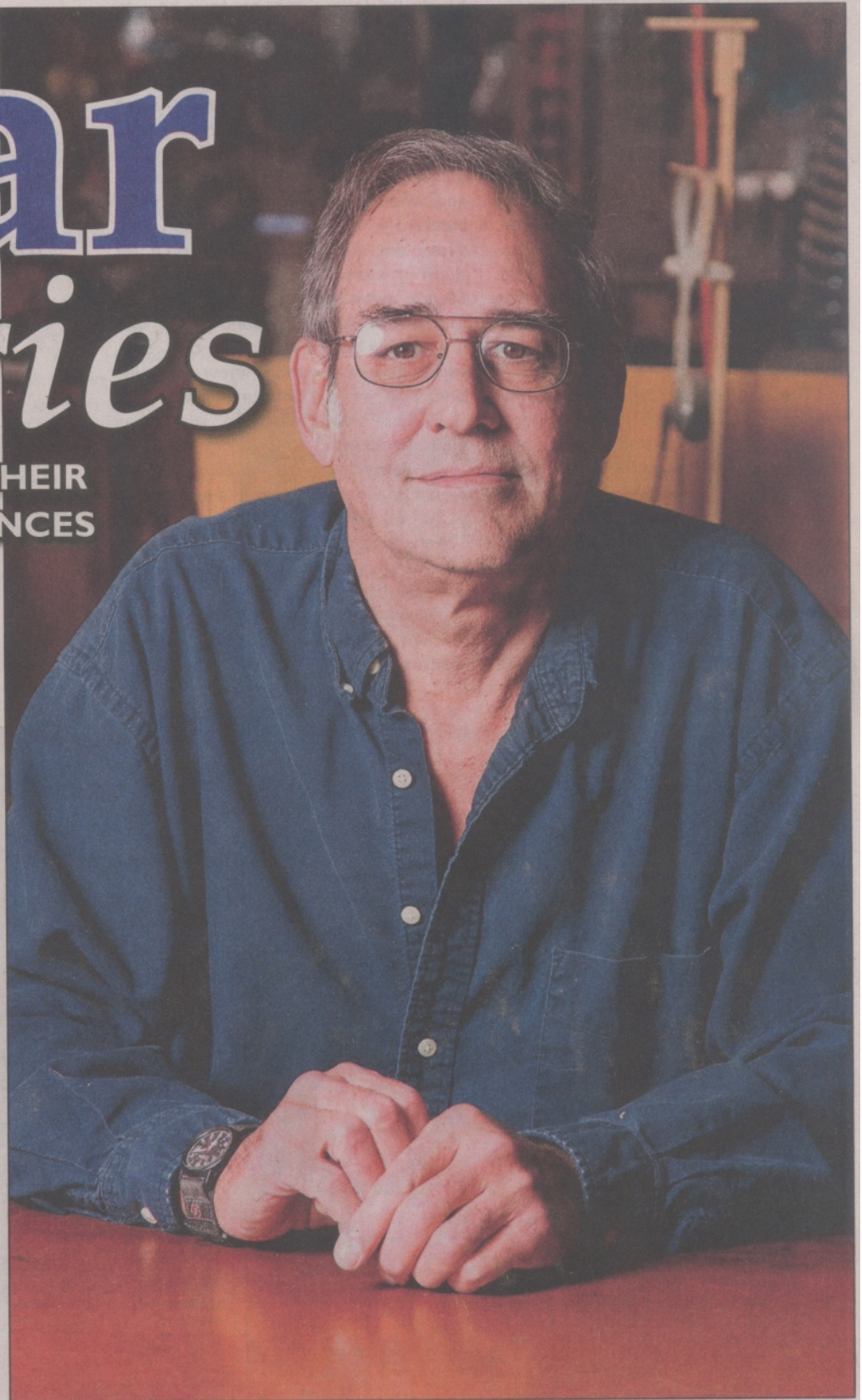
*"No event in American history is more misunderstood than the Vietnam War. It was misreported then, and it is misremembered now."
—Richard Nixon, New York Times, Mar. 28, 1985*

Last year we visited with World War II veterans and asked them to share their stories of serving through the largest war the world has ever seen. As we celebrate Veterans' Day, we ask those of the Vietnam War to do the same.

As the quote above suggests, the Vietnam War may still be one of the most debated conflicts of the 20th century, but it still has many veterans who went to fight for their country and who did so bravely. They, with their Korean War counterparts, were among many Iowans who served during these two conflicts. Eight thousand Iowans were sent into the Korean War. More than 500 were killed. 869 were casualties of the Vietnam War. Here two local Grimes Vietnam War veterans share their stories.

Rick Hutcheson

Rick Hutcheson was only 18 years old when he was drafted into the Army in 1969. He went to Louisiana for basic training, then on to Georgia and Kansas before heading overseas to Vietnam. He spent his time in a reconnaissance platoon, hiking through the



Veteran Rick Hutcheson spent his time in Vietnam in a reconnaissance platoon, hiking through the jungle looking for signs of the enemy.

jungle looking for signs of the enemy.

"We were out there on our own," he says. "Let's put it this way: When you're hiking down trails, I had my M16 on full automatic, and that's the way we hiked all day with the safety off because you never knew what was around the corner."

Only 10 to 20 other people may have been out there with Hutcheson. They might run across a whole encampment of enemy soldiers. That challenge was compounded by the issue of the terrain. Most of the time, they hiked in heavy jungle with only 30 - 50 feet of visibility.

The soldiers also carried everything they needed to be gone for a week. When Hutcheson picked up his pack, it weighed 165 pounds fully loaded. They had to have food for a week, ammunition and all their other supplies. A helicopter would drop them off at a designated spot, then pick them back up a week later, where they'd head back to base to resupply.

At night, setting up camp was of the utmost importance. The men would

break up into three or four squads, which would each watch a different section of the perimeter. They would take shifts being on guard and sleeping.

"We'd have Claymores set up, which were anti-personnel explosive devices," Hutcheson says. "They're about six inches high and a foot long and curved, and when they blow up, there are big steel balls in the front of them that shoot out and cause injury. You'd set them on a trail, and they'd cover out to 50 feet away. They're a good defensive mechanism. About a pound of C4, and it was a big boom. When you blew one, everyone in a few miles knew you blew one. That was part of our defense."

When asked what he remember most, he answers wryly.

"I guess my most notable memory would be when I tripped in a booby trap of some kind and got injured," he says. "There was a big explosion, and I lost part of a leg, and I got medivacked out and sent back to the states."

That was the end of his time in Vietnam. He was there for three months.

*"There was a big explosion,
and I lost part of a leg, and I
got medivacked out and sent
back to the States."*

— Rick Hutcheson

Despite the unpopularity of the war at the time and the anti-war sentiment that was prominent among certain groups in the U.S., Hutcheson and other veterans feel they did what they were asked to do, and they did their jobs.

"I would say the majority of us were there fighting for our country, and when we got home we were treated like crap," he says. "We were the baby killers and all this. We went over there, and we did what we thought was right. You go out there and see what we did, and we'll see what you're going to do and who you will kill."

He says until the last decade or so, many veterans wouldn't even admit to having served — unless they first knew they were talking to a fellow veteran. Hutcheson can remember when a friend in Norwalk had a daughter who interviewed him about his time in the war for a school

project. She was one of only three classmates who could find a Vietnam veteran to talk to.

"Now they go to war and have big send offs and big parties when they come home and everyone is a hero, and it wasn't that way for Vietnam," he says. "You quietly went and quietly got home, and you went on with your life."

Howard Ruggles

Howard Ruggles also served in the Vietnam War. He also left in 1969, but he was nearly 22 years old at the time, older than many of the men he served with. He had been working in Cedar Rapids before he was drafted. He did his basic training and advanced infantry training in Louisiana, and then he had 30 days leave before he was shipped out to Vietnam.

He was an infantryman who worked in the field with the First Cavalry Division. He spent his



Photo by Todd Rullestad

Howard Ruggles was drafted and left for Vietnam when he was nearly 22 years old. He spent eight months on the front lines.

eight months in Vietnam on the front lines.

"The Vietnam War was different because you didn't just line up and fight an enemy," he says. "You walked around the jungle and searched for them. It was guerrilla warfare."

Ruggles and his fellow soldiers would spend 28-32 days in the field. They did reconnaissance in five-man groups, so they would set up listening posts and motion detectors and watch for troop movement. If they found any, they would report it back and wait for orders on what to do next. Every four or five days, they'd get resupplied out in the field, and they might get a letter from home then.

After their time in the field, they'd report back to a fire base, or a secure area that's fortified. There they would resupply, rest and get their gear in order for the next mission.

"What I remember most is the inconvenience and the filth," he says. "It was wet and muddy. It rained every night, and you'd always be wet. And the Vietnamese people just seemed really oppressed."

Ruggles didn't have much contact with civilians. His dad fought in WWII, and his advice was to steer clear of them — in

"It was wet and muddy.

It rained every night, and

you'd always be wet. And

the Vietnamese people just

seemed really oppressed."

— Howard Ruggles

guerrilla warfare especially, you never knew who the enemy might be. That was particularly true among the Viet Cong in Southern Vietnam. Ruggles spent most of his time in the northern area, and on the Cambodian border, participating in the Cambodian Incursion in 1970. The locals there weren't as much into trickery as they were in the south.

After his time spent on the front lines, Ruggles was in the rear for five months. He was discharged in July 1970, and he returned to Cedar Rapids to his job, and then he entered college in 1971.

Reluctant to share some memories about his time, he does remember the camaraderie with his fellow troops. Though they were hesitant to form any real close friendships, since you never knew what could happen, he did stay in contact with a few of his fellow soldiers.

After he returned home, Ruggles says he didn't personally experience a lot of the anti-war sentiment. But he says he also had five months afterward to cool off before returning to his day-to-day normal life.

"The only resentment that I may have is that I really didn't think they allowed the Army to fight the fight," he says. "There was a lot of publicity, and it gave a lot of negative connotations to the war, and I think we had some silly rules. If we worked in rubber plantations, we couldn't shoot until shot upon, and that would stick in a lot of a lot of infantryman's craws. There was a lot of pushing and shoving but no clear cut victory." ■