

# Veterans' Day: a reminder that heroes walk among us

By Karla Goolsby, [kgoolsby@houstonhospice.org](mailto:kgoolsby@houstonhospice.org) Published 3:16 pm, Thursday, November 10, 2016



Photo: Submitted Photo

Frank Hay recently recalled his time spent in Vietnam, including time as a prisoner of war.

The 68-year-old courier has tried to put his memories of the unpopular war in Southeast Asia behind him. He certainly doesn't think of himself as a hero. Nevertheless, while **Frank Hay** was making his rounds at Houston Hospice recently, his Vietnam Veteran ball cap was spotted by a staff member who thanked him for his service. He nodded his thanks and thought he'd be on his way until the staff member invited him to talk about the war. Houston Hospice is part of The National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization's "We Honor Veterans" program. As a result of learning more about the needs of veterans and their families, staff members have a tendency to notice vets.

In 1966, 18-year-old Frank Hay and his family lived a quiet country life on the banks of a lake outside North Guilford, Connecticut. North Guilford was a pleasant town with a volunteer firehouse, a general store and a gas station. As a kid, Frank got a kick out of walking on the lake's barely submerged island to the astonishment of visitors who thought he was walking on water. With a school career frustrated by dyslexia behind him, Frank went to work as a **Railway Postal Clerk**. He counted bags of mail that were loaded and unloaded from rail cars as part of the **Railway Post Office** (RPO). Frank's family knew young men were being conscripted to assist with a conflict in a place called Vietnam, so they weren't surprised when he was drafted.

Frank was sent to Fort Gordon, Georgia for pre-induction physical examinations and testing. His dyslexia caused the army to suspect he was faking to get out of service. However, additional testing revealed a high IQ and the kid who grew up deer hunting in the woods of Connecticut was trained to be a gunner on a helicopter. During basic training Frank recalls thinking the war was a game.

 Share on Nextdoor

"I thought we'd come in and say '**John Wayne's** here. Step aside.' The first time someone got shot, I thought, 'Wow! This is real.'"

Frank's first impressions of Vietnam were clouded by confusion.

"We're in our own world in the U.S. and when you go there you realize things are not the same."

He felt disoriented to be in a place where people were so impoverished that they were forced to sell a child rather than part with a cow. Frank had been in Vietnam only seven months when his helicopter was hit by enemy fire and crashed killing the pilot and co-pilot. He was captured immediately by the enemy who took him into the jungle where they were holding other prisoners of war. There were no POW camps at that time so the enemy cut the sole of Frank's foot to prevent him from escaping.

He remembers being moved constantly for 14 months.

"I talked with other prisoners but I didn't become close because a lot of them died. Some of them went loony."

Fellow POWs died of disease and starvation. Frank figures he lost about 50 pounds.

"We'd stay in a hole dug in the ground with bars over it. They fed us rice and fish. I'll never eat rice again."

During the constant moves, the prisoners were separated and brought back together. Whenever Frank's foot began to heal, it was cut again.

"I took my anger out on God. I'd say 'Why did you let this happen?' 'Why don't you do something?' I couldn't be mad at the enemy. They were soldiers too."

One day while the prisoners were out of their holes for a move, their encampment came under fire from a **U.S. Army** helicopter. Everyone ran. Guards ran. Prisoners ran - in all directions. Frank ended up half running and half hobbling with two other prisoners.

"We just kept running until we ran into a U. S. Army unit."

He was taken to a field hospital where he was treated and debriefed. From there, Frank went to a **VA hospital**. After his injuries healed he was sent home.

Frank didn't stay in touch with any of the guys he met in Vietnam. He didn't keep a uniform, or a photo or any memento of his service.

"After the war, people asked why I was there and why I was fighting and killing. We were just soldiers on both sides. We were only doing what we were told. I just wanted to get on with my life."

Frank recalls being spit on and called a baby killer. He went to the VFW Hall in Guilford, Conn., where he was ridiculed.

"The other vets said that Vietnam was not really a war."

Frank resents being denied camaraderie at the hall.

"In those days they had dances, parties and baseball games. Now it's just a place to go drinking. I'm tired of older people coming up and shaking my hand. Where were you when I came home?"

Frank doesn't like to talk about the war. But in an act of extreme generosity, he did. He did move on. He moved to Houston and, at 50, met and married his wife who hails from Buffalo, N.Y. Frank has no desire to return to Vietnam. The courier has moved on but some wounds remain.

#### About Houston Hospice

As a leader in hospice care for people of all ages and all walks of life, nonprofit Houston Hospice provides for the distinct needs of Veterans and their families through its We Honor Veterans Program. Care is provided to patients and families in private homes and in residential facilities throughout Houston and 10 surrounding counties. Inpatient care is provided in the Houston Hospice Margaret Cullen Marshall Hospice Care Center in the Texas Medical Center. To learn more about the We Honor Veterans Program and other services, call 713-468-2441 or visit [www.houstonhospice.org](http://www.houstonhospice.org).