

A tribute to local veterans

Written by Elizabeth Barrett
Thursday, 14 November 2013 14:43 -



Area Vietnam War vet shares experience.

The smell of a diesel engine, the sound of a helicopter chopping through the air and the sensation of heat and humidity on a sweltering July day.

All of these can bring back memories of war to former Cozad school superintendent John Grinde who served in the Vietnam War.

“I didn’t walk in their shoes,” he said about other veterans and other wars. “But maybe we share some of the same feelings.”

Army E-5 Sgt. Grinde talked about a demanding drill sergeant before he was shipped overseas.

Demanding, he said, because “what you do affects someone else and if you can’t make it in basic training, you aren’t going to make it overseas.”

Before landing in Vietnam, Grinde said he was used to hearing CBS broadcaster Walter Cronkite telling the number of war casualties and woundings each Friday night.

“You knew what you were facing when you got there,” he said.

Shortly after he arrived in Vietnam, Grinde said there were explosions and two Americans killed though not from his company.

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“I don’t want to be here,” he remembers thinking.

Grinde’s job was to check the dead enemy for documentation that could lead to important information for U.S. troops.



At the time, the dead bodies of enemies didn’t mean anything to Grinde and other soldiers.

Civilian interpreters would translate what was found and Grinde would pass written information on to his superiors.

After three weeks in the country, his company was fired upon and Grinde dashed for a bunker.

“My heart was pounding and my legs felt like lead,” he said. “And it was all in slow motion.”

As he sat against sandbags in the bunker, his lieutenant told him he needed to rest.

“I knew he knew what I was thinking and feeling, ‘I don’t want to be here,’ “ Grinde said. “I was scared out of my wits.”

After another attack with rockets and mortars, he said one of the dead had worked in a U.S. compound doing odd jobs.

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“You didn’t know if people were friends or enemies,” Grinde said.

Grinde also talked about an attack by vicious mosquitoes during his tour of duty when he didn’t use a mosquito net.

“My head looked like a basketball and my fingers were like frankfurters,” he said.

And how important mail and care packages with food was.

“Some of the guys had their girlfriends put perfume on their letters and they’d pass them around,” Grinde said.

A pleasant memory was Christmas Eve.

He and other squad members were outside their hooches (slang for dwellings) on a gorgeous night full of stars and started singing “O Holy Night’ and other Christmas songs.

“To this day, whenever I hear that song, I think of the canopy of stars that night.

Thirty days before he was finished with his year- and four- month tour, Grinde said he was afraid something would happen and he wouldn’t get home.

