

Veteran brushed with death on Christmas

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Christmas Day, 1965, was just another day in the life of Marine radio operator Bill Denney, stationed in Vietnam.

Denney was almost killed twice that day, yet he recalled it as typical of his three years fighting the Viet Cong.

"I didn't even know it was Christmas until this guy said to me, 'Hey, did you know it's Christmas?'" Denney said.

A lance corporal, he noted that the passage of time became meaningless to him after his 1964 landing in Danang, a city on South Vietnam's northeastern coast.

"Time had no meaning (in war)," Denney said. "Sunday was the same as Saturday, Wednesday was the same as the other days in the week."

Once he went to Vietnam, he also shut out feelings for his American homeland in order to deal with the pain of the war. "There wasn't anything in 'Nam that would make you feel homesick," he said.

Nonetheless, Denney would doubtless have preferred the streets of his west-side neighborhood in Rochester — where he grew up attending Holy Family Parish — to the hill outpost he found himself guarding Christmas Day.

Faced with the prospect of being drafted at age 17 after finishing high school, Denney decided to enlist in the Naval Reserve in 1962. A year later, he joined the Marines. "I decided to try the Marines and become 'a real man,'" he said sarcastically.

As a Marine, he was eventually stationed in Okinawa, where the thought of fighting in a little-known former French colony never entered his mind. Returning one day from winter maneuvers in Japan, he and his fellow Marines were ordered to get their gear ready to go to Vietnam, which Denney had never heard of before.

After being stationed in Danang, Denney began flying all over Vietnam, jumping out of helicopters with Marine units to radio in coordinates for artillery and air strikes. Because he never knew exactly where he was during combat, he couldn't recall the location of the hill where his battalion was camped along with a unit from the South Vietnamese Army on Christmas Day, 1965.

Assigned to a foxhole with another Marine, Denney remembered only two indications of Christmas: his battalion observed a unilateral cease-fire, and his food rations that day contained a pound cake.

"I think we were allowed two cans of beer," he added.

As the day wore on, Denney and his companion talked about the subject that always occupied their minds — the futility of the Vietnam War. Raised to believe communists were godless anti-Catholics, Denney said he initially supported the U.S.



A tattered photograph is the only visual record remaining from Bill Denney's tour of duty in Vietnam, during which he was initially stationed in Danang.

war effort "for about two-and-a-half minutes."

But as he watched his commanders commit one blunder after another, and as his friends died in action, Denney came to question the war's purpose.

"We had no reason to be there. We had no right to be there. We caused an incredible amount of destruction that had no reason and being," he opined.

Denney interrupted his foxhole debate to climb out and relieve himself. He walked down the hill to find a spot to dig a hole — standard Marine procedure, he recalled.

As he swung his entrenching tool — a combined hoe and shovel — toward the ground, Denney noticed a trip wire stretching across the spot he was about to strike.

"I dropped the field tool in mid-air," he said, noting that he might have been killed had the tool not narrowly missed the wire, which was connected to a grenade. "Then, I very gingerly made it back up the hill," he recalled, adding with a laugh, "From then on, I got constipated."

His first brush with death that day didn't discourage the young soldier from later going down to a river for an unsanctioned swim, along with several other Marines.

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Babette G. Augustin-Staff photographer
Denney embraces his step-son Liam, 3, with whom he will be spending Christmas this year.

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All entries must be received within seven days of this paper's issue date. Winning names and answers will be printed the week following each drawing.

The Catholic Courier
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