Vietnam veteran recalls two tours of duty

Posted by TBN_Charles On 05/25/2017

Charlotte Hall, MD - William Bellamy, a resident of the Charlotte Hall Veterans Home, is a frequent visitor to the Charlotte Hall Library. The staff there know him by name. He is a true Southern gentleman, raised in North Carolina. But there's a lot they don't realize about this quiet, unassuming African-American.

A Marine Corps veteran, Bellamy served two tours of duty in Vietnam during the war in Southeast Asia.

"I was a combat engineer," he recalled. "Wherever the infantry went, we went. Some of those places, I couldn't even tell you how to pronounce the names.

"I first went over in '65," he said. "When I finished high school, we moved up to New York. I said, 'I have got to find a way out of here.' I did not like it. I volunteered because I just wanted to get the hell out of New York."

The war in Vietnam had a million ways to kill you and survivors often had nothing more than blind luck on their side, he admitted, recalling an incident from his first tour. "I was on Hill 22," he said. "I was in a tent; there were seven of us. I got up about 2 o'clock in the morning to go to the bathroom and I was about halfway to the latrines when I heard this woosh and a mortar round hit right in the center of the tent I had been in. If I hadn't gotten up, I would have been right in the middle of that explosion.

"There were three or four killed and one of them was a Vietnamese man who was working for us," Bellamy explained. "We found out he was a lieutenant for the North Vietnamese Army [NVA]. That happened all over Vietnam. You didn't know who to trust. They would work for you and then they'd go tell the NVA where to bomb you. When they found his body he had a map on him of every American installation over there."

His reenlistment for a second tour of duty was not hugely popular with his mother.

"My Momma said, 'What are you, a fool? You survived over there and now, you're volunteering to go back?' " he recalled.

"My second tour was much harder than the first," Bellamy admitted. "That's when everything started happening. That time, I was a tunnel rat. I would go into an opening not that large. I had a .45 in one hand and a knife in the other. The knife was for probing for booby traps, because you never knew what you were going to encounter. I went in one cave and crawled in there. It was on the side of a big mountain. The tunnel opened up into a large room as wide as that cafeteria down the hall. They had mortars, M16s, all kinds of weapons in there. We blew that up. I put enough C-4 in there to move the mountain."

Memorial Day is a time for remembering those who died serving their country and there were two Marines from his first tour of duty Bellamy recalled in particular.

"There was one Marine, a man from Albany, New York," he said. "He was a young kid off the street. You couldn't tell him nothing. Another guy was from Georgia. We were doing a mine sweep. I was a corporal at that time. We had to clear the road of mines. I had conducted a training session the day before and I told them over and over, 'If you see one, get away from it, don't tell anybody. Just mark the spot and move on,' because they had all different kinds of mines, depression mines, release mines, and often they would have a wire running from the mine underground to a place out of sight where they would wait and then detonate it when they saw you were there.

"I had three mine sweepers sweeping the road," Bellamy added. "The guy on the left, who was the guy from Albany, found this mine. Instead of doing what I had told him, he called out, 'Hey, I found one.' The guy behind him, from Georgia, he stupidly went right over to it. They [the VC] had wired it, and they set that thing off and all I saw was arms and legs going up in the air every which way. When we got back out of the field the CO called me into his office and began chewing my butt. Another guy walked by and said, 'Why are you chewing his butt?' He told them not to call out or go near it. We had classes and everything. They didn't do what they were told."

Bellamy noted that the war was a place where not paying attention to the smallest of details could cost you your life. He stressed, "They were just young kids, 19 years old.

"The scariest it was for me over there was when I was on Hill 55," Bellamy said. "They had choppers bringing explosives in. We were building a fire base on this mountain. They were bringing in this ammo and they put it in one big pile. The VC started shooting mortars at us and one of those mortar rounds hit that ammo and it started going off. It took down two choppers. We started diving off the mountain because rounds were going off everywhere. That was a scary day."

The veteran was awarded two purple hearts.

"The first time I was hit in the thigh, I was back in the field in a couple of weeks," he said. "In August 1968, in the Tet Offensive, I got hit by shrapnel. It went through my boot and into my ankle. I didn't feel it at first. One of my soldiers said, 'Hey Sarge, you're bleeding.' The medic came over and cut my boot off and I had a piece of metal sticking out about a half inch. When he pulled it out it was about three inches long. They called a chopper and put me to sleep. When I woke up in the hospital, they had already done the surgery. They sent me home after that."

Vietnam was as deadly as it was beautiful, he said. In addition to being confronted by enemies often in greater numbers than your own, the land contained great apes, man-eating tigers, deadly cobras and any other number of unnamed perils. "If something moved out there, you shot it," he said callously.

For a man who survived two tours of duty, the experience was one of death and living. Vietnam veterans were scorned when they came home. The war for many could not be forgotten because of the intense nature of it. It is ingrained, embedded. "It was like being a recovering alcoholic," Bellamy said. "You lived one day to the other, one step at a time. And you had to be careful where you stepped, because they had all kinds of booby traps that could take you out. I've seen some things, let me tell you."

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