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The vietnam vet and his long-lost friend

The Marines called him GTO. Mike Neil thought of him as a son. Now, 40 years later, Neil returns to battle his demons – and find the boy.

By **John Wilkens**, Union-Tribune Staff Writer

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People sometimes ask Mike Neil if he ever thinks about the Vietnam War.

“Every day,” says Neil, a retired Marine brigadier general.

It's not just the combat, the night ambushes and hours-long firefights in the jungles and rice paddies near Da Nang. It's not the Navy Cross he earned for taking out an enemy machine-gun nest.

Mostly what he remembers from his 13-month tour are the people left behind – the dead and the living.

Earlier this year, the ghosts called him back, as ghosts have been doing to military veterans for hundreds of years.

“Something felt unfinished,” Neil said.

He wanted to see some of the battlefields, leave laminated photos of two friends at the places where they were killed. And he wanted to find GTO.

GTO was a boy befriended by Neil's platoon.

He was 11, the ringleader of a group of children who wandered over regularly from their village to a nearby bridge the Marines were guarding. His father was the village barber.

“He was smart as a whip, very likable, and we kind of adopted him,” Neil said.

The boy spoke English fairly well. He knew all the words to the song “G.T.O.,” which is how he got his nickname.

Neil bought GTO his first shoes, a pair of black leather lace-ups. He took him to a Bob Hope show, where they stood on the stage next to Raquel Welch. He sneaked him behind the wire for a Christmas party at Delta Company's camp on Hill 41.

He also showed the boy and his friends how to tell the difference between Marine and U.S. Army vehicles, and taught them how to salute the Army ones in a special way – with their middle fingers extended. In wartime, you get your laughs where you can.

Neil, 68, thought about all this as he left San Diego seven weeks ago for a return to Vietnam, his first since the war. He had with him 50 fliers his wife, Jan, had made up featuring a collage of black and white photos of GTO from four decades ago.

“He would say, 'Wouldn't it be great to find GTO?' and I would just roll my eyes, because there was no way it was going to happen,” Jan said. “After this much time has passed? He didn't even know his real name.”

The trip was with Vietnam Battlefield Tours, a Texas-based nonprofit that has been taking veterans back since 2005. Bob Burke, a retired Marine sergeant who led Neil's tour, said the journeys are always emotional.

“There's no one reason why people decide to return,” Burke said. “It's personal, and the feelings are always just below the surface. You can see it in their eyes when they first get there.”

Neil had a rough idea where the village was, but so much has changed since the war. Hills that used to be bare are now lush with vegetation. Reservoirs have inundated valleys. New buildings are everywhere.



Mike Neil of San Diego, who was deployed to Vietnam in 1967, befriended a Vietnamese boy whom his fellow Marines nicknamed GTO because he knew all the words to the song. (Mike Neil) -



Mike Neil recalled how GTO, the Vietnamese boy, was “smart as a whip” and “very likable.” (Photos courtesy of Mike Neil)



Neil said his Marine platoon “kind of adopted” GTO, once sneaking him into a Christmas party.

On the fourth day, they found the bridge the Marines had guarded, and then the village, Duong Lam. Neil, working with a translator, started handing out fliers.

One older woman said she recognized the boy. She went off and came back with a cell phone number.

The translator called. A man answered.

THOUGHTS OF VIETNAM

His father was a Marine for 30 years, but Neil grew up wanting to be a lawyer. He attended Boalt Hall at the University of California Berkeley. One night there in December 1965 he went to see a documentary film.

The anti-war movie had footage of a Marine helicopter getting shot down. It showed the pilot exiting the wreckage and the Viet Cong shooting him. Neil said other moviegoers cheered and clapped.

He joined the Marines the next day.

They sent him to officers school after he finished his law degree. He asked to be infantry, a grunt, so the Marines made him a platoon commander with the 1st Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division. He was 26 and a second lieutenant when he arrived in Vietnam in June 1967.

Six months later, he earned the Navy Cross, the second-highest award for valor. The battle at Phouc Ninh was in the dark, in dense vegetation. Some of it was hand-to-hand combat – “a terrible night,” Neil said. About one-third of his 25-man platoon was killed or injured.

The citation for his medal reads like something from a “Rambo” movie: drawing enemy fire so others could move forward; taking off his armored vest to put it on a wounded comrade; tossing hand grenades while rushing a machine-gun emplacement.

But when his tour ended, Neil didn't return home to a hero's welcome. The public, he said, didn't care about the sacrifices. That left him bitter and disillusioned.

When the war finally ended, with the Americans withdrawing in 1975, his disappointment grew.

“I felt our government sold out and abandoned Vietnam,” Neil said. “We left a lot of good Vietnamese people on their own. Then when the Communists overran the country, it left me and a lot of other veterans with tremendous feelings of guilt.”

By then, he and Jan were married and he was in the Marine Reserve. They settled near Mission Bay and had two children: Megan, now married with two young children and living in Phoenix, and Sean, now a middle-school science teacher in Clairemont.

Jan Neil said her husband had trouble sleeping from time to time in the early years after he returned from Vietnam.

“He didn't talk about it much, but I knew he'd seen some horrific things,” she said. “He lost some close friends over there.”

As he built a law practice specializing in personal litigation, Neil gained a reputation around town as someone larger than life, square-shouldered, proud of his Irish heritage, quick with a quip.

He was like a character from an Ernest Hemingway novel. He co-owned a downtown bar, Reidy O'Neil's, for several years. He ran with the bulls at Pamplona. He commanded a tank battalion in the Marine Reserve.

In September 1990, during the Persian Gulf War, Neil returned to active duty and served nine months as the commander at Camp Pendleton. He retired two years later.

Through it all, Vietnam was never far away. He thought a lot about Larry Smedley, one of his squad leaders, posthumously given the Medal of Honor, the nation's highest valor award, for actions taken in the same battle that earned Neil the Navy Cross.

He thought about Frank O'Brien, who was in his officers class, killed in action March 24, 1968, on what was supposed to be his final day in the field before his tour ended.

And he thought about the boy.

“GTO was the closest Vietnamese person to me,” Neil said. “We had an almost father-son relationship. I felt some



When Mike Neil returned to Vietnam about two months ago, he tracked down GTO, now a middle-aged husband and father, whom Neil declined to identify by name.



The reunited friends shared a five-hour lunch, and a tearful goodbye. Neil said he hopes to return again to Vietnam.



guilt about him, about leaving him, and I needed some closure. I wanted him to be OK.”

FACING GHOSTS

Nine former Marines were on the two-week, \$3,100 tour, and they all had places they needed to go, ghosts they needed to face.

“Vietnam carries so many memories for these guys,” said Burke, the tour guide. “Some haven’t talked about what happened there for 40 years. They have a lot of anxiety, but as the tour progresses, they relax. Nobody’s shooting at them this time.”

Neil was there with two other San Diegans, Mike West and Mike Barksdale.

“I don’t know what we expected to see after 41 years, but it was still a great feeling to get back and walk that ground again,” said Barksdale, who flew helicopters in Vietnam and was in Neil’s battalion. He is now a corporate pilot for Qualcomm.

Barksdale said each place they stopped, the ex-Marine who was there during the war would tell his story. When they heard why Neil wanted to go to Duong Lam, they all had the same reaction: “Fat chance,” Barksdale said.

But then they were in the village, and Neil was passing around the fliers, and suddenly the translator was talking on the phone to a middle-aged man.

“Ask him what his nickname was,” Neil told the translator. He didn’t want to be duped.

The translator spoke into the phone in Vietnamese, then turned to Neil. “He said the Marines all called him GTO.”

Neil still wanted to be sure. “Ask him what his father did for a living.”

“He said his father was the village barber.”

They made plans to meet two days later. Neil and Barksdale were going to take a cab for the 20-minute ride from their hotel. But GTO was already waiting for them in the lobby.

“He said he couldn’t sleep all night, so he just got up in the morning and drove over,” Neil said. “It was very emotional seeing him.”

Neil said GTO’s English has fallen off over the years, “but he still had the same personality, the same energy.”

They shared a five-hour lunch, catching up on each other’s life with the help of a translator. GTO is a successful businessman, married with four children.

“It was fulfilling to know he had lived through it all and done well,” Neil said.

When they parted, “there were tears in our eyes,” Neil said. “But I’ll see him again. I want to go back.”

He knows GTO’s real name now, but Neil asked that it not be published. He said his friend is wary of possible repercussions from his association with Americans – then and now.

GTO did not respond to e-mail requests for an interview. His cousin, in an e-mail to Neil, said, “He has his own career in the Vietnamese government, so he can’t reply (to) the reporter’s e-mail. He said he was sorry about that.”

Now, almost two months after his trip, Neil finds himself taking on another mission. GTO has a 14-year-old son who would like to attend college in America. Neil has been talking to immigration officials about making it happen.

He also finds himself talking more about Vietnam, opening up with family and friends about his experiences there.

“A lot of things that had bothered me came off my back,” Neil said. “I feel at peace with the country.”

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