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Vietnam veteran returns with son of fallen friend

By Francesca Chilargi
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TRENTON — On his second return trip to Vietnam, John Craven continued his efforts to help the once war-battered country.

After a visit in 2007, Craven, 61, and his wife, Gail Craven, 60, wholeheartedly committed themselves to raising money for a new junior high school in a secluded village, M-Drak.

The couple, along with 17 others, traveled to the Third World communist country for two weeks earlier this month to check on construction of the facility.

Due to the country's travel regulations, however, the group members were not able to see the school site (see related story). Though, they were able to see other comparable facilities.

John Craven's interest in Southeast Asia goes back more than 40 years, when he was in the Army's 70th Combat Engineer Battalion. His mission in Vietnam began in 1965 and ended Nov. 29, 1969.

That war experience has inspired him to provide indigent Vietnamese children with educational opportunities.

Recently, he has been able to accomplish that goal through his involvement in the Development of Vietnam Endeavors Fund, known as the DOVE Fund.

The nonprofit organization works closely with the U.S. Department of Foreign Wars and Vietnamese community officials to build schools, water-treatment systems and medical facilities.

This summer, the DOVE Fund will mark its 40th school, Craven said.

The Cravens donated \$5,000 to start construction on the school and for fund-raising efforts. The rest of the money for the \$63,000 facility will come from donations and a \$13,000 subsidy from the village government.

Ground was broken for the school in November and it is slated for completion in a few months.

The two-story building will house 338 sixth-through ninth-graders and replace their dilapidated facility, which lacks bathrooms and is riddled with mold, Craven said.

The idea to become involved with the DOVE Fund was born as a way to honor three of Craven's friends who served with him and died in the Vietnam War.

During his visit to Vietnam last year, he honored the memory of his former comrades with a plaque that he placed on a compound where they had died.

"After that, it was great satisfaction in being able to do that," he said. "... I understood their deaths weren't in vain."

Another source of funding for construction of the school is Craven's recent self-published book, "A Legacy of Hope."

The book tells of Craven's struggles with his war experience and his reluctance to cope with those memories until the past few years.

The book features many photos of Vietnamese children, including two girl cousins on the cover. It concentrates mainly on the last two years of Craven's life, as he became more and more immersed in the DOVE Fund and its work.

Craven snapped the picture of the two 7-year-old girls last year while visiting a school site. This year, they serendipitously met again at the same location.

He believes it was a divine power that reunited them.

Although a majority of the people in Vietnam live

in poverty and have an average annual income of \$400, they are required to pay for education, he said. And because many cannot afford to attend school, they are robbed of an education, Craven said.

The Cravens have decided that they will personally pay the tuition for the two girls to attend college, if they choose to do so.

"It's something to do," Gail Cravens said.

The DOVE Fund has a tuition-assistance program for its schools that covers expenses for students based on need and performance.

Gail Craven said the hope is that the students will attend a university and obtain a relatively good job to help their village and others succeed.

Part of mending his wounds from the war, Craven said, has been to find the relatives of his three deceased friends and surviving veterans.

Through online research, Craven located his surviving comrades and will

gather for a reunion in August in Springfield, Ill.

He also has connected with two families of the deceased veterans. One of those family members is Wayne Robert Elkins Jr. of Sanford, Maine.

Speaking through tears a few days ago, Craven said that when he looks at Elkins he sees a 44-year-old man with 6-year-old eyes. He sees a child yearning to know about his father, Wayne Robert Elkins.

Elkins was 6 years old when his father died in Vietnam.

"And that was difficult because I was processing my own stuff and helping him," Craven said.

After an initial awkwardness when they first met in Sanford last year, they bonded, the Cravens' said.

After listening to Craven share stories about his father and viewing pictures, Elkins said, "He made it so interesting."

Elkins said he vaguely remembers his father, but he didn't have details about his dad's life in the military because no one in his family spoke about him.

"My mother had a hard time with my father's passing and did not want to talk about it," he said. "I learned most of the war and about my father from John."

Another surviving veteran also helped bring Elkins closer to his father.

Conquering some initial apprehension about traveling outside the country, Elkins and his wife, Tracy, ventured to Vietnam.

They wanted to see firsthand where his father served, as well as experience the foreign land and culture.

The couple took many pictures to remember the experience, but the photos don't fully capture the country, Elkins said.

"What we did see was awesome and unbelievable," he said.

Craven said he was shocked the couple made the trip to Vietnam.

Then he realized it wasn't so extraordinary because Elkins wanted to know more about his father and the country.

During their visit, the Elkinses saw about 20 DOVE Fund projects, including a school that the junior high school will mirror.

"The stuff that John is doing with DOVE Fund is unbelievable, and the students are appreciative, and they want to go to school," Elkins said.
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