

ONE MAN'S JOURNEY



Photo courtesy of John Craven

Saluting during the Laying of the Wreath ceremony in front of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., during Memorial Day weekend 2006 are veterans who belong to the Development of Vietnam Endeavors, or DOVE Fund. The nonprofit group raises funds to build schools, medical centers and clean-water facilities in the Third World country.

Vietnam veteran honors memory of 3 soldiers

BY FRANCESCA CHILARGI
THE NEWS-HERALD

TRENTON — Most people probably wouldn't outright describe themselves as being self-absorbed for years.

"I was No. 1 in my life and everything was revolving around me, and I know that is not very healthy, and I did it for a very long time," John Craven, 61, said recently.

He has weathered challenges throughout his life. He said he still battles issues, but his rebirth in a Christian faith keeps him on the right path.

What else keeps the Vietnam veteran, who was a squad leader in the Army 70th Combat Engineer Battalion's mission from 1965 to 1969, going is helping provide the basic necessities the Third World country lacks.

In early 2006, Craven joined the nonprofit organization Development of Vietnam Endeavors, or DOVE Fund, to help build schools, medical and clean water facilities in poor villages in Vietnam. (See related story.)

The Vietnam veteran, similar to other soldiers, experienced post traumatic stress syndrome. But the criticism of the war by Americans in the 1960s and '70s further confirmed for him that it was best to repress his feelings and memories of the war than share them, he said.

He also endured "survivor guilt" because he outlived the war, but three of his friends did not.

Until Craven turned to God, he said he blamed himself for their deaths and questioned if he could have done anything differently to prevent them.

The men, who died on Oct. 4, 1969, haunted the veteran for years. He vividly recalls that day because it was the 21st birthday of one of the men and his wife, Gail.

Craven was a squad leader over two of them and the third soldier was in the squad next to them.

They served at a campsite called Reil-Davis, just outside the Khanh Duong vil-

lage.

"In a war, you can get close to someone, but you don't get close to them," he said. "It's a relative thing. Very few GIs got very close to each other because you kind of had to keep a protective distance because you never knew if that guy was going to be around in a half hour."

Gail Craven, 60, is his college sweetheart. She waited and corresponded with him during the war.

The Cravens were "blessed" with a daughter, Adrienne, 33, who has a doctorate in pharmacology and works at the University of Michigan.

Years later, Craven located family members of two of the deceased soldiers. Their encounter was extremely emotional, he said, but helped his healing process.

In 2006, he made his first visit to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., better known as "The Wall." He

participated in the Laying of the Wreaths ceremony, sparking an idea on how to honor his three deceased friends.

To honor the fighters, he created a memorial plaque from the wreath ceremony and traveled to Vietnam in March to place it on the campsite where they died.

He plans to visit the country again in March, but this time with one of the soldier's sons and his wife.

The son was 6 years old when his father died and wasn't allowed to attend the funeral because his mother thought it might cause emotional damage, Craven said.

The son vaguely remembers his father, but can clearly recall when the soldiers came to tell his mother that her husband had died.

"So he never had closure with his father," Craven said. "He wants to see where his father served, where his father died, where his father walked. That will be very, very healing."