

Mary-Jayne McKay

(CBS) Morley Safer goes back to a 1965 *CBS Evening News* broadcast and revisits a group of American soldiers who in 1965 were facing the reality of war for the first time – in Vietnam.

In October, 1965, the U.S. First Air Cavalry division had just arrived in Vietnam and was preparing for its first airmobile assault, an operation called "Shiny Bayonet."

These specially trained troops got a baptism of fire. As two companies of the First Battalion, 12th Cavalry, moved forward into An Khe, they began taking casualties from sniper fire.

One of those casualties was only a boy, Tom Sowards, who at 17 needed his mother permission to into battle. On Oct. 10, 1965, he barely hit the ground when he was shot in the neck.

"It seems like I went to sleep after I got shot," Sowards recalls. "I laid there for a while, and when I woke up, it was kind of quiet and peaceful. I thought I had gone to Heaven actually, until Sgt. Raines came to rescue me."

Snipers were also shooting at 23-year-old Jim Raines as he dragged Sowards up a hill to safety.

"I got him [Sowards] on the hill," Raines remembers. "I just got on the hill, and got on the hill and grabbed my rifle. And he shot my rifle out of my hand and got me in the arm. The shrapnel from my rifle went in my arm."

He wasn't sure Sowards would make it to safety alive: "When I got there, I looked at him and he was just a crumble of gear, human body and pile, laying right in the middle of a rice paddy, and he wasn't moving. And I probably was there, maybe, 15 minutes. And then he raised his left arm, raised that up and he said, 'Mom.'"

It was a serious injury. Sowards lost half a lung, and spent the next 18 months in various hospitals in Hawaii, Alaska, Texas, and South Carolina. He finished his tour of duty at Walter Reade Army hospital.

Sowards wasn't the only casualty that day. Eighteen-year old Dick Randol was in Vietnam with one of his best friends, 17-year old Terry Wright. They met at the induction center, trained together, and shipped out together. On Oct. 10, they were ready to meet the enemy. Only Randol came home.

"Everybody was excited about going," he remembers. "All this training, all this hard work - everybody and anybody that could make an excuse for being out there was going to go."

A Medivac helicopter was on its way, but by the time it arrived, Wright was dead.

"It had a very, very sobering effect on a lot of us young guys," Randol says. Within 24 hours, they had become veterans. And at the end of the week, he was a survivor.

Terry Wright's death brought a change of policy – 17-year-olds were banned from combat.

In Vietnam, the battle went on.

After two days of fighting an enemy that rarely showed himself, the unit came up against a dug-in, seasoned Viet Cong battalion. Maj. Joe Bellochi, the executive officer, was overhead flying a small reconnaissance helicopter, watching things go from bad to very bad.

He called for Medivac helicopters, but they were unable to get in to take the wounded out.

"I was a pilot," Bellochi says, "so I took my little observation helicopter, which normally carries two people, and made about five trips in there, took out about eight wounded."

He received the Distinguished Flying Cross for that.

Bellochi tells Safer he never stopped that day to calculate the odds. "There are people in trouble, and you go out and get them. Probably if I would have thought about the odds, I wouldn't have done it."

Operation Shiny Bayonet was prelude to the first major campaign in Vietnam. The battle for the Ia Drang Valley lasted little more than a month. When it was over, 305 First Cavalry were dead, over 500 were wounded. From that day forward, there was no question that winning the war in Vietnam would be neither swift, nor easy.

"It was the intensity of that particular battle," Bellochi tells Safer. "I think we got an indication of that in Shiny Bayonet. They're very tenacious fighters. Very well trained. They're skilled at what they do or what they did."

Joe Bellochi did one more tour in Vietnam and retired a colonel in 1977.

Last summer, some of the men of the 12th Cavalry held a reunion in Colorado. Many of them have fought other battles – personal battles - since 1965.

"Some of our group that we still keep in contact with, have a rough time with the war," says Jim Raines. "The rest of us, we stay in pretty well close together yet. And the rest of us try to coach 'em, to get 'em to come to these military reunions with us. And it makes a lot difference."

Randol had praise for the highly trained soldiers of 1965, '66 and '67. "And, of course, then the draft kicked in. You had an awful lot of people that didn't wanna serve," he says. "And I think the country as a whole changed towards the war after the Tet Offensive. But, I mean, for what we were up against, they done a remarkable job. And I'm proud of each and every guy that I

served with. And if I had to do it again, knowing the outcome, I would do it again."

Randol knows just how lucky he was. "At 19 or 20 years old, you don't think about that," he says. "My dad turned 20 in a German POW compound. I turned 20 in the central highlands of Vietnam. I guess it was my time. Every generation has a time and that happened to be my time, I guess. And I feel extremely lucky, now at 55, that I did come home."

Sowards came home a deeply scarred man, in body and spirit, and tried to erase Vietnam from his life. He lives the quiet life in Virginia and still is reluctant to even cast his mind back those 37 years.

"I went so long without talking about it, it all sounds kind of strange," he says. "I'm not holding a grudge, you know, against the Vietnamese people. They have their own right to their country. And their own belief. I didn't particularly care about their communist views. But you know, I was just there to do my job. And I feel bad that I didn't get to finish my job. But, nobody did."

In four days of battle – Oct. 10-14 - the Cavalry suffered 91 casualties. Eleven men were killed. Their names can be found on Panel 2E of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.