

# NEELEY

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"They thought I would be injured seriously or killed," he said.

Still, Neeley set off to Fort Polk in Louisiana for four months of basic training, then spent another four months in advanced individual training with weapons and tactics.

Soon after, he headed to Vietnam.

"I flew into country in Cam Ranh and got my assignment," he said. "I was supposed to go to a four-day orientation school, but I went the first day and then they brought us back to the company headquarters and told us the company had been ambushed and we needed to go out to the field right away."

During the first fire fight, Neeley said many from his company were wounded or killed.

"It wasn't really an easy way to start a tour of duty," he said. "I don't really remember much about the next few days, but we did a little patrolling and then they pulled us back and had us do bridge duty which essentially was just guarding bridges."

Neeley remembers living mostly out in the field during that time.

"We slept on the ground and made our hooches out of shelter halves" he said.

He spent about a year in Vietnam before, as his family had feared, he was injured not once, but twice.

"The second time I was wounded I was medevaced out to Japan and then Brooke Army [Medical Center in San Antonio]," he said. "Somebody had set off a booby trap and it was pretty close to me

and I got some shrapnel on me. The wound itself wasn't too serious, but my arm was paralyzed for awhile. It took several years before I was able to gain full use of it."

When Neeley thinks back to his time in Vietnam, he remembers the brave men who exemplified the definition of courage.

"We were all kind of scared to death at the time," he said. "But the thing that I was impressed with most — and still am — no matter how frightened people were, or how hard the tasks we had to do, people just went ahead and did it."

After he was discharged from the military, Neeley said he always wondered what happened to the people in Vietnam.

"We had some degree of guilt, sort of an abandonment," he said.

In 2012, Neeley married Sandra, through their mutual involvement with the Terry's Texas Rangers, reenactors of the Civil War.

"Over the years we found out about a reunion of the 1st Cavalry Division and then found out about a reunion for the company I was in," he said. "Several people had the idea of getting together and going on a trip to Vietnam."

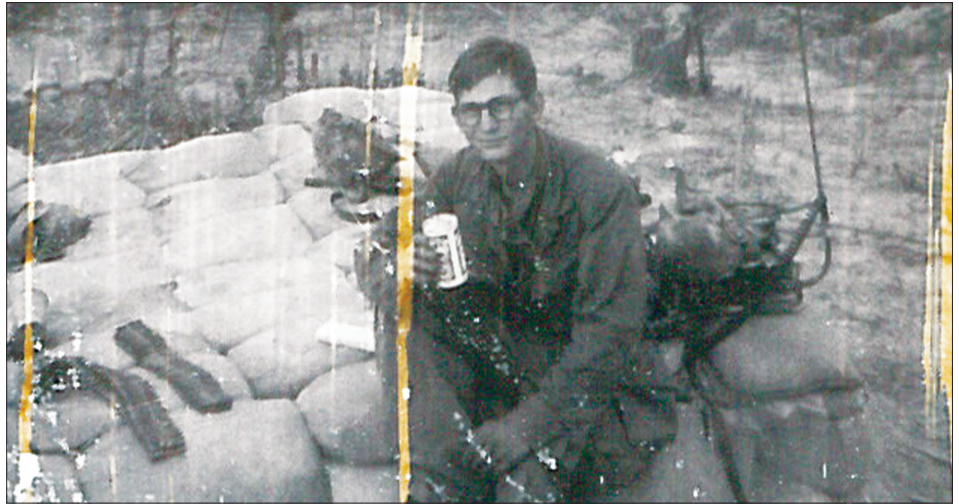
Sandra Neeley thought it would be great for her husband to revisit the country.

"They wanted to customize their trip to try to go to places the men had actually been," she said.

Plans were made and a group of 18 soldiers and their spouses took the 17-hour flight to Vietnam and stay from April 8-22.

From the beginning of the trip," Sandra Neeley said she could see a spark begin to ignite in her husband.

"There was one man who



Courtesy photos

**James Neeley was drafted to the U.S. Army in 1967 and served in Vietnam during the war. Neeley was wounded in combat twice while he was there. Below: Neeley, right, and a friend visit a bell tower in Vietnam where he stood night watch while serving in the U.S. Army.**

was there the same time James was, but they had been in different platoons," she said. "On the plane, they helped each other remember things because they had the same experiences, even though they didn't personally know each other then."

James Neeley said speaking with the Vietnamese when he got there, brought a sigh of relief.

"They were pretty happy with the way things were going [back then] even though we didn't accomplish what we thought we were doing when we were there," he said. "They were still grateful to us for being there and showing them how things can be. They attributed a lot of the success they are having now to what they learned from Americans while we were there."

During their visit, James Neeley was able to visit several places where he served.

In one field, the group stopped to hold a small ceremony.

"We would have a beer and pour it out around the flowers [placed on the ground]," he said. "Then we would salute."

James Neeley also found the bridge where he had guard duty, a river near a field he remembered and a bell tower where he stood night duty.

The couple also got to visit Vietnamese restaurants, statues, landmarks and much more.

"James thought so good about how well they have done," Sandra Neeley said.

Robert McMinn, of Terry's Texas Rangers, sat down with James Neeley after his trip.

"We talked for a long time and he told me all about his trip," McMinn said. "I think it is healing to go back and see the country completely transformed. The people were real nice to him and treated him like royalty. He said it seemed like a dream and asked if it really happened."

