

A GI's story: Coming of age in war

By Mark Humbert

Even now, nearly 50 years from when he served in Vietnam, Elias Huerta doesn't like the night.

"Even now I get that weird feeling that something's about to happen," he said.

He spent a lot of time at night in 1967 with another soldier in a bunker – one of several along the perimeter of his Army post near the Cambodian border in an area that was called the "Iron Triangle."

"There was always someone trying to sneak through the perimeter," he recalled. "And one night they were determined to come in. It was so freaking dark we couldn't see out there. Though we had wires stretched all over and mines set up, they would sneak through there. They would fire and we would 'cut down' on them.

"That night the VC came through the first lines of wire and came close, maybe 50-75 meters, and started shooting. We couldn't see them and the last thing you want to do is throw a flare up – for sure then they would know where you were at and they would see you. They were lying low on the ground.

"Then the weirdest thing happened: One of them let out a laugh and it felt like we would reach out and grab him. They knew we couldn't see them so I told my friend (what I heard). We lobbed a couple of grenades and didn't hear any more noise. (In the light) there was no sign of them. They were good at carrying the dead out, but they would leave something behind: knives, sandals, rice balls ... that was a weird feeling."

It was difficult to know where the enemy was, but in guerrilla warfare – first associated with Mao Zedong in China and Che Guevara in Cuba, and still in practice today – it was also difficult to know who the enemy was:

"It was common for the

Big Picture



Like others his age, Elias Huerta left the farms near Brighton to serve his country in the Vietnam War. *Huerta family photo*

Vietnamese to take their stuff to the village to sell – chickens, pies, etc. – on a bike-wheel cart or on their heads."

Huerta said he and some other American GIs were in their bunkers, witnessing a group going to market when some small-arms fire broke out, "coming from behind one of those carts.

"It was our job to fire back at them to let them know WE knew they were firing at us. But this guy, Newhouse, starts shooting and I know the guys in the next bunker started shooting.

"I don't know ..." Huerta paused "... how many went down ... of theirs."

Nearly 50 years later tears welled in his eyes: "It's a loss ... and you try to make sense of who is innocent and who's not. The mentality of some of these guys was, in so many words: screw 'em all ... shoot all of 'em and sort 'em out later.

"It's not right, you know."

War brings real horror stories worse than anything one can conjure up on Halloween, and Elias Huerta's tour of duty in Vietnam has left him with enough to last the

rest of his life.

The third child in a farm family of 10, Huerta was born and raised on a farm in San Benito, Texas, about 20 miles or so from Padre Island. The closest big town in the Rio Grande Valley was San Antonio. The family became migrant farmers in 1955, first spending summers in the Brighton area, then moving here shortly after Elias was drafted, as a 19-year-old in 1965.

That was a typical story among Brighton's Vietnam veterans, according to Joseph Sena, who lived his first 20 years in Brighton (until he served in the war), and was one of 24 siblings of a farm family.

"There were six of us," Huerta said. "My brother David, an uncle, two cousins, a neighbor, they told us to put our personal affairs in order and we'd hear from them shortly. That was probably January or February. I got my notice in May – we were already in Brighton." He contacted the Selective Service and they told him to report to Brighton's draft board office. There he was told the monthly quota had been filled but he'd be on the top of the June list.

He thought he would report and go home on that June day. Instead he was off to Denver, given "\$10 or \$15 for lunch." He made a friend that day, Jim Martinez, who knew his way around Denver. After lunch he found himself on their way to Fort Leonard Wood in a train car originally meant for cattle.

"I think, in the back of my mind, I never told my dad or family that I wanted to go. I never told them it was something I wanted to do, and I knew the risks, but it didn't matter: It was just the will to serve your country."

He was in Fort Stewart, Ga., a few months later when he received his assignment to Vietnam.

"There was a guy in my barracks who worked in personnel," Huerta said. "He would ... let us know if

any orders came in to go somewhere. A couple of orders came in for Korea, some orders came in for Germany, and he always saved 'the best for last.' He looked at me and said, 'you're going over there.' A couple of others also were told they were going (to Vietnam).

"I went to Texas and said my goodbyes to my uncles and family," he said about his 30-day leave before he shipped out. "It was the first time I actually saw my (future) wife face to face."

He talked to Tules (still his wife) quite a bit then and they began a long-distance relationship. "We kept writing back and forth."

Though he had feelings for her, he said, he didn't want her to think he had long-range plans.

He left for Oakland, Calif., on a troop carrier flying out of Buckley Air Force Base "at 1 or 2 a.m. One of my sisters, my bother Dave and a couple others dropped me off in the middle of the night. I've never been back (to Buckley) since then. I don't know where it is and I have no desire to go there."

Amid a chilly reception from the locals, hot days, monsoon rains (and the resulting jungle rot on their perennially wet feet), and C-rations, they also were fighting war.

In addition to Special Forces training to learn about anti-personnel mines, booby traps, trip wires and camouflage, he also took two months of primary light-vehicle training and was assigned to the 163rd Transportation Company.

He was involved in two major operations – Cedar Falls and Junction City – lasting anywhere from two to five weeks, and "a lot of little ones," commonly called "search-and-destroy" missions.

"You were actually chasing the enemy, and I was the lead person in the convoy – we would move the units in the convoy to wherever they needed to go. You would take the most experienced guy in the lead truck with a 60mm machine gun.

"'Charlie' (short for VC – or radio code 'Victor Charlie' – for Viet



Huerta has continued his public service since returning from the war, serving on the Brighton City Council and Urban Renewal Authority. *Local Color file photo*

Cong) was constantly shooting at you," he said. "We called it harassment fire. I always prayed, asking God not to let me die from a sniper shot. When you were in the field you were exposed to mines planted on the trails – never paved – and Charlie had a way of doing things. They would fire at one side of the convoy, having mined the other side. Americans didn't understand the enemy had years of experience – they fought the French for years (before the U.S. presence). Guerrilla warfare was never a trick in the (our) book.

"They had a good way of communicating – and they didn't have cell phones then – and they knew exactly what we were doing."

He said their goal was to disable a convoy and then rain mortar fire "and rock the hell out of you" on the tanks and armored personnel carriers among the vehicles.

He said incoming and outgoing gunfire and explosives led to the hearing loss he now suffers.

A mortar attack caused another of Huerta's war wounds. "I got hit twice, though neither was a direct hit.

"It was a mortar that hit right

under the truck," he said. "Mortar rounds were a way of 'entertaining' us, coming in and going out. You could hear them when they were close. When we realized (this one) was going to hit us, we all tried to jump off the truck." He indicated the concussion of the mortar might have pushed them farther and faster than their jumps did.

"I landed on – I don't know what – maybe a stump. A few days later I wrapped my knee – it was cut, not from direct impact or a fragment or anything like that."

And the danger could come from anywhere, he said.

It was even common in the villages for a kid to be carrying a grenade, he said. "They'd say GI No. 1, VC No. 10 (worst) – a kid, an old woman or old man – anyone could kill you."

A child might hand a soldier a coconut or papaya. "You would bust it open and it would explode in your face. They would hang American flags in the trees, and when a GI tried to pull them out, it was a booby trap."

He admitted there are some things he experienced there that he will carry to his grave.

"Having seen the opposite side of atrocity, I could see how one could develop that ("shoot now, sort later") type of mentality, he said. "We were fighting an enemy that had no heart.

"We could go into a village and see straw huts still burning, so you knew the area was still real hot: I witnessed just one time a couple of our guys – part of their fatigues ripped off – hanging from a tree: they had been mutilated. We had to cut them down."

The U.S. soldiers shared a secret desire: They preferred to die than to be taken prisoner.

Huerta said they also knew the secret way to make enemy soldiers talk: "We didn't abuse prisoners, but truth, they would start blabbing if we threatened to give them to the Koreans. South Korea didn't follow the Geneva Convention."

He took pictures. Some, without the graphic violence, he sent to his parents. The ones showing those vivid images went to a friend who kept them until he returned.

Letters from home and family were treasured by the GIs. Huerta said he kept one from his brother in his helmet to share with others in camp.

"I kept one from my brother inside my helmet and read it several times," he said. Because they were often on the move and in remote places, mail call was infrequent, so soldiers read the same ones over and over to each other, whether from wives, family, friends

... And that letter from his brother was coming apart from the moisture during the monsoon season, but he'd pull it out and "read" it from memory.

"The bottom line is that you tried to obscure or put in a separate place the bad things. Then you truly highlight the good things," he said. "That way it makes it easier.

"And as much as I loved my family and wanted to be with them and see them, after a month or two there, I put them on the back burner," he said. "It's not that I didn't love them, but the guys I was with were the ones that mattered (for our survival).

"It kept me from going cuckoo," he said. "A lot of guys spooked out, they would fall apart on you. It reminds me of what some people call battle fatigue.

"I think the worst part was making the adjustment to your everyday life after you came back. It's a lot better now: I got married right away (Dec. 10, 1967) and started a family, but my poor wife went through hell. I just hope I live long enough to make everything up to her.

"The worst thing was I didn't trust her and she never gave me a reason not to trust her, but at that point I didn't trust anyone – not the people next door. I didn't want to do much with anyone, I wanted to keep them where I could see them.

"It took a long time," he said.

Late during Elias' time in Vietnam, his brother Dave received his induction notice. Dave was going through the deferment process (a hardship deferment to help his parents raise the younger siblings), and the Army couldn't send two brothers into the same war zone area at the same time. Army officials offered Elias another stripe to keep him there (at the time he was an E-4), but Elias held off on his decision. When Dave's deferment was approved, Elias turned down the promotion (and the six-month extension on his service) and came home.

At the time, he was in the north, when his unit had taken a troop ship to join as reinforcements for the Tet Offensive. They didn't know it at the time, but figured it out when they landed. Still, he was on his way home before the big push began in early 1968. (The war ended in 1973.)

Nearly 20 Vietnam veterans, who called Brighton or Fort Lupton home before the war, have attended meetings to discuss a memorial for the local armed-services members who served.

Few wanted to talk about their experiences in Southeast Asia, some said they don't remember and don't want to remember. Others continue to honor agreements they signed while in the armed services that they would not disclose where they were and what they did.

Huerta remembers his time, whether it was swapping C-rations or loading bodies of the killed or wounded in battle onto helicopters.

"You can do everything you can to help them, but sometimes it doesn't work out.

"If not for the helicopters I don't know how many guys wouldn't have come home or gotten where they were supposed to be to get help."

He made two choices he regretted: not joining the Navy (he slept well during his two "peaceful" days on the ship); and not going to flight school – to be a copter pilot – when he had the chance in his training at

Fort Stewart.

There was one final near irony: Huerta and a few others who were headed home the next day went to a bar for a last drink near Tan Son Nhut. "All of a sudden shooting started," he said. "I already had turned in my firearm and a friend didn't have his." Later they learned the guy who came in shooting was a South Vietnamese soldier and was shooting at another Vietnamese guy. "I told my buddy, 'We spent all this time in the jungle and could have been killed in a bar.'"

Huerta is thankful to Jose Gonzales and other local veterans who attended a City Council meeting in July (2016) to ask for a memorial for those who served. Huerta had expressed a similar wish last December (2015), during a lengthy conversation with a City Council member. He said he was driven by the thought of his neighbor, whose son, Tony Martinez, was killed in action. He thought it was time for those veterans, who had a cold reception when they returned home, to be remembered.

It's apparent that it isn't for his sake: He hasn't received all the medals and certificates he earned all those years ago, though his oldest daughter has requested them, including a Purple Heart recommended by the local American Legion post.

He has high praise for a woman who is tracking all of the Colorado GIs who failed to return home, whether killed or missing.

"She's succeeding like no other," he said.

To him that's almost as satisfying as the note – he still has – that the Continental Airlines stewardess left on his lap as he slept on the flight home: "You've been in Vietnam. You're Number 1 in my book."

But he shed tears of joy when he recounted "the best feeling in my life: seeing his family waiting on the observation deck at Stapleton International Airport as his plane taxied after landing. ●