

Seabees gather to look back on time spent in Vietnam War

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By Beverly Van Buskirk, Lifestyles Editor

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(Sentinel Photo by Beverly Van Buskirk) Friends for more than 15 years, this group of Seabees took time to visit the Plymouth County Historical Museum's Military Room and view items from the Vietnam War, which they served in. They were in the area for a reunion they have made an annual event. From left, are, Neil Jensen of Woodbine; Dick Slayton of Wilmington, Illinois; George Kern of Topeka, Kansas; Gerald Groom of Akron; and Gerald Hayward of Summerville, South Carolina.

AKRON — They call themselves brothers, men who served in the Seabees during the Vietnam War.

United States Naval Construction Battalions, better known as the Navy Seabees, form the U.S. Naval Construction Force (NCF).

Gerald Groom of Akron served in the Seabees in Vietnam from January to September 1968.

More than 15 years ago, he went to a MCB53 reunion of Seabees and met up with four men who served from March to November 1969. Since then, Groom, and those four, Dick Slayton of Wilmington, Illinois; George Kern of Topeka, Kansas; Neil Jensen of Woodbine and Gerald Hayward of Summerville, South Carolina, have gotten together each summer, sometimes at one of their homes, to remember, reminisce and be thankful for being together.

"They had a reunion and I bumped into these guys," Groom said.

"I invited him to be with us," Slayton recalled. "My wife and his wife got to be crazy friends at that reunion."

This year, the reunion was held the second weekend of July in Akron. The men gathered at the Plymouth County Historical Museum in Le Mars to share a little bit about their time in service and the bonds they have forged in the years since.

“For about 15 years, we get together every year somewhere,” said Slayton. “We’ve had it all over the country — Montana, Illinois, South Dakota, a cabin in Wisconsin, Woodbine. Last year we were going to an air show in Wisconsin but COVID shut it down.”

The men shared a little about their time in Vietnam.

“I arrived there in January of ‘68 and left in September of ‘68. I got there just in time for that Tet Offensive, with one clip of ammo,” Groom said. “It about scared the crap out of us. You know the war was supposed to be winding down, and then oh my. We couldn’t do construction work because we had to fill in the guard places for the Marines because the Marines had to do patrol.”

One of his construction jobs was building a chow hall for the Marines, a 40x100 foot building, complete with a kitchen and dining area.

“I ended up putting up Butler buildings, those 40-x-100 tin buildings, for storage in Vietnam, because there was so much material rotting away, so that’s what I did in ‘68,” Groom said.

Slayton, Kern, Jensen and Hayward were stationed at Da Nang, south of the DMZ in 1969.

During that time, the four worked on a construction crew maintaining and repairing roads and whatever else had to be done so troops could move around in the country.

“I was mainly stationed in Da Nang, and if they needed a dozer, I’d put it on my semi and take it to them,” Slayton said. “I also ran next to Cambodia, as I had an uncle 11 months younger than me in the Fifth Marines there, so I used to run supplies to the Fifth Marines, too.”

Jensen explained, “Up north of the DMZ our main purpose was to pave roads. We had a rock quarry with rock dump trucks, and the rock crusher. The job was paving roads so they couldn’t put the land mines in the dirt roads.”

But they were also on the security side.

“The Seabees, we build, we fight. A lot of us were on the fighting part of it. We weren’t always out paving roads, we were on the security part of it around the camp day and night,” Jensen said. “I was shooting mortars all night long, sleeping all day. So we did other things besides construction work. We had to keep our own bases secure.”

Hayward added, “Building was our priority, primary job, but we fight defensively. We don’t go off on offense. We did not have Marines guarding our camp, we guarded it ourselves.”

“But most generally, the enemy didn’t bother the Seabees because we were there to improve their country. We weren’t there to kill ‘em. So they would just let us slide on by, but not all the time,” Slayton said.

Jensen said it was definitely a war zone.

“When you ran a convoy, you’d get shot at, sometimes a lot,” he said.

“It can be routine for 30 days, and then you’re in the wrong spot at the the wrong time,” Groom added.

Jensen continued, "The Marines were the best thing to have when the 'gooks' decided to start shooting. They would come running when we were diving for cover. That was their job. We didn't have to have permission to shoot, but we were supposed to. But when you were out on your own, you didn't worry about that."

"It was called terms of engagement. Don't shoot until you're shot at," Hayward said.

Those are the stories the men share year after year, although some of the stories gain a little, Jensen said.

"But you can't tell tall tales because we were all together," Slayton said.

Once the war memories are shared, the conversations turn more to joint replacement, health issues and family.

"We have a good time when we get together. We're brothers," said Hayward. "Dick Slayton is our 'padre,' he does all the praying at the meals and we appreciate that."

Jensen said, "We're all better off knowing each other, we're all brothers."

For the group, it's Christmas in July, as they bring gifts for the others each year.

The men still remember the politics about the war, and how decisions were made, but try not to dwell on that.

They went to Vietnam as young soldiers, and returned home changed.

Groon said he was married when he served in Vietnam, and was able to meet his wife, Brenda, in Hawaii for R&R.

Returning home from Vietnam was a challenge in a lot of ways.

"When we got back from Vietnam, it wasn't fun getting home," Slayton said. "The people, when you got out at an airport, said we were baby killers."

"And they spit on us," Jensen said.

Slayton said when he got off the plane, he had to wait 10 days before reporting to the base.

"So I got home," he said. "I was scheduled to get married in June and I said no, now."

"When I got married, I had to have my parents give me permission to get married in Illinois because I wasn't 21. I just got off the plane from Vietnam and now I have to get permission to get married. I just thought that was funny," Slayton said.

Hayward added, "It was a terrible experience because you had this experience of being in Vietnam, and it is a completely different world than what we're in. And you come home and nobody wanted to talk about it. It was like you got out of prison or something. Nobody wanted to discuss it or think about it, everybody was sick of the war."

Kern said it was a different experience for him.

"Mom and Dad were there when the plane landed. When I got off the plane, we were the last flight in. I had a 72-hour pass, and a buddy lived in Michigan. My dad said he was going with us," he said.

"It was election night, local elections, and the guys are down at the local fire company. My dad said to stop. We're still in fatigues, we walked in, and they forgot all about the election. There was a drink in each hand for us."

Jensen said his hometown was pretty good, too. "Every place else was a pain in the ass."

It took a long time before their service in Vietnam was recognized.

"I'd been home almost 25 years before I had anybody say 'thank you for your service,'" Jensen said.

Hayward said that started long after they got home.

"Everybody says it now. We still appreciate it," he said.

"The first time somebody said that to me I was in shock," Kern said. "I was in a store, and somebody said thank you for your service. What could I say?"

Kern spoke up.

"It changed us all. My dad said he saw a change when I came home from boot camp and when I came home from Vietnam I changed again," he said.

Hayward said it stays with you for a long time.

"It ain't never going to go away either. I have to take pills for it," he said.

"Without them pills, you're kinda screwed," Jensen added.

Groon said it bothered him when he first got home, but it doesn't anymore.

Hayward added, "It didn't bother me then, but when I retired I had plenty of time to think about it. When I was working I was too tired to think about it. When I retired it hit me like a brick, I mean, I started thinking about it all the time, the next thing I know I'm in the hospital for it, and getting all these goofy pills."

They also talked about how fireworks affect them.

"I hate it. Some of the small stuff still makes me jump," said Hayward.

Groon added these days the fireworks sound like small arms fire.

For Jensen, the fireworks aren't bad if he knows they're coming.

Slayton said they are all still a little jumpy, but if you know it's there you know what it is.

Hayward recalled a time soon after he returned home and he was at a friend's house. In Vietnam, sirens were a signal for incoming rounds.

"I was sitting with friends drinking coffee when an ambulance went by and put on the siren. I cleared the coffee table and plowed a furrow through the rug," he said.

Meanwhile, Kern, who himself has prostate cancer, said he has lost buddies from Agent Orange.

"What we went through makes all the difference because I went back into the reserves, and I retired from the Seabees through the reserves," Kern said.

Kern is also the group's phone expert, keeping in touch with the men to make sure everything is going OK.

"There's nothing better than getting together every year," he added.

While the memories of war will always be with them, the five men agree it's been great getting together year after year and sharing stories.

"We have a very good time, a lot of laughing, nobody gets mad," Groon said.

"I love the camaraderie," Jensen said.

The gatherings will continue as long as they are able.

Kern maybe summed it up best: "This is a good country."