

Man who volunteered to put his life in danger continues to volunteer

By Cameron Moist

Deep in the swampy, humid highlands of Vietnam in a forgotten wasteland called Tue Hoa in 1970, this U.S. Army Airborne Ranger wasn't regretting his choice to volunteer in the Vietnam War.

Darryl Benton, of Rockledge, Florida, had determination in his eyes as he confidently strut into the U.S. Army recruitment office and volunteered to enter the Vietnam War.

"I have always been a volunteer," Benton said. "I wound up in Vietnam because both my brothers had been there and my dad was a retired lieutenant colonel, so I had to go."

At a time when many people were running in the opposite direction to avoid going to war, he wanted to help stop the spread of communism.

Benton started out in the 173<sup>rd</sup> Airborne Infantry Brigade known as "The Herd." After a short time he volunteered to be a part of a six man Long Range Patrol team as a Charlie Ranger.

Benton was engaged in 27 missions in Vietnam and the job was to go into the woods, find the enemy, kill them and search through the enemies' belongings to find some Intel.

During his time in Vietnam, Benton overcame incredible obstacles with his everlasting pride, true-grit determination and a lot of luck. He survived a grenade blast when one of the men on his team tripped a booby trap and sent a Chinese-Communist grenade rolling out in front of Benton and stopping at his feet.

The blast of the grenade severely injured three of the Rangers around him, yet he survived without a scratch. After that incident, he was given the nickname that would stick with him throughout the rest of his days – “Bones!”

“They called me ‘Bones’ because I was so skinny that I couldn’t even get hit,” Benton said.

On the helicopter ride back to base Benton started thinking critically.

“I had only been in Vietnam for a little over 30 days and I already lost half my Rangers,” Benton said. “Pretty quickly I had to become a pretty tough warrior to be able to survive ... and survive I did.”

Even though he was an extremely tough warrior, Benton suffered from Malaria, which is a mosquito-borne infectious disease that causes fever, fatigue, vomiting, and excruciatingly painful headaches. Army Medic Steve “Doc” Gove, who went out with Benton on a few missions, knew all about that.

“There were a number of guys who had it (Malaria),” Gove said “If I found out somebody had it I would stick a couple IVs in them and put them in ice.”

At the end of his duration in Vietnam, Benton hopped on a plane and in 48 hours he was standing on the driveway of his home in Rockledge, Florida.

His childhood best friend, Mary Beatty, wrote to him every day while he was in Vietnam and got a letter back at the end of each week.

“I can tell you that it definitely wasn’t the easiest of times,” Beatty said. “But I know he was proud of what he was doing and I was extremely proud of what he was doing.”

Benton had a hard time adjusting back to real life, but kept working throughout his life and making sure to stay busy.

Even in the midst of trying to remain busy, Benton still suffered from Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). In 2005 his PTSD got so bad that while on a job in the Cayman Islands he got physical with a construction worker. That incident scared Benton so severely that he sought professional help. He decided to see a therapist because he had so much on his mind that he kept locked away and he was taking it out on others violently.

Benton also noticed that he was having some breathing trouble and decided to go to the Veterans Administration clinic. The doctors found that there was a fungus growing on Benton's right lung. To keep the fungus from spreading, the doctors removed  $\frac{3}{4}$  of his right lung.

From almost getting blown up, to fighting off Malaria, to coping with PTSD, and now living with pretty much one lung; Benton could have just given up on life, but he knew he was meant for something more.

Nowadays Benton spends the third Sunday of every month volunteering with Heroes On The Water. He is part of the Space Coast chapter in Central Florida and has been volunteering for this organization for a little over a year.

Heroes On The Water serves the nations warriors with therapeutic kayak fishing trips to help them heal and get used to living the civilian life again. The organization provides all the supplies they will need. A kayak, paddle, fishing pole and bait are all provided for free.

They start out on the water at 7:30 a.m. and come in around noon. After the morning of fishing everyone comes back to have a cookout – where the food is also free – and exchange in conversation about their experiences on the battlefield.

“This program is not just for the physically wounded, but the mentally wounded as well,” Benton said.

Benton, along with many others, relates with these veterans by sharing stories of what he went through in Vietnam and what happened after. He tells them how he overcame everything to live a normal life again.

“What I am trying to do is help people,” Benton said “With Heroes On The Water I try to help them come back to reality and be able to live like a civilian again.”



Darryl Benton is seen petting a dog in Tue Hoa, Vietnam.

PHOTO COURTESEY OF DARRYL BENTON.



All strapped up and ready to go! These Rangers pose for a quick picture before a mission in Vietnam.

PHOTO COURTESEY OF DARRYL BENTON



Helicopter dropping off supplies to soldiers in Vietnam.

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A framed flag of Darryl Benton's Ranger team.

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Darryl Benton cools down in the shade after a kayak trip.

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A group of veterans pose for a picture at a Heroes On The Water event.

PHOTO COURTESEY OF DARRYL BENTON

#### Sources

Darryl Benton, U.S. Army Ranger (Retired), 321-394-1721

Steve Gove, U.S. Army Medic (Retired), 913-469-6413

Mary Beatty, Rockledge City Official, 321-720-6500