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Page One - The War Without Heroes?

"... Vietnam was a war largely without heroes."

Stephen Hunter

The Washington Post, February 27, 1999

"Much has been written about the Seawolves, the Navy helicopter gunship squadron that worked under CTF-116 (Navy River Patrol Force). I don't know a single SEAL who operated in Vietnam and wasn't saved by those guys at least once. They were the best helo crews I'd ever seen. The Seawolf crews were real heroes."

Capt. Robert A. Gormly, USN (Ret.)

Combat Swimmer: Memoirs of a Navy SEAL

By GORDON I. PETERSON

Senior Editor

When Americans gather to honor their war dead this Memorial Day, it is a fitting occasion to refute one of the lingering misconceptions associated with the Vietnam War—the notion that heroism somehow was in short supply among the ranks of those who served in that bitter, protracted, and socially divisive conflict.

Many of the heroes of that era rest silently today--men like Aviation Ordnanceman 3rd Class James A. Wall, a Navy helicopter door gunner from Atlanta, Texas. Following recruit training in 1970, Wall volunteered for duty with the Seawolves of Helicopter Attack (Light) Squadron Three (HAL-3). He arrived in Vietnam in June 1970.

Formed in 1967 as the Navy's only rapid-reaction armed helicopter

squadron, nine detachments of heavily armed UH-1B "Huey" helicopter fire teams were stationed at key locations across South Vietnam's Mekong Delta region. The detachments provided close-air support for riverine operations on the Delta's all-important waterways—working with the "brown water" Navy of river patrol boats, Navy special-warfare SEAL teams, and other units. The Navy helo gunships could be airborne within minutes day or night. Urgent calls for help arrived frequently in Navy tactical operation centers: "*Scramble the Seawolves.*"

Wall was initially stationed at HAL-3 headquarters in Binh Thuy, but he soon volunteered for duty with a squadron detachment as a combat aircrewman. Dennis Caldwell of Santa Ana, Calif., a close friend who served with Wall at the time, recalled that Wall was not content to remain at squadron headquarters. "He wanted to get into the fight on detachment," Caldwell told *Sea Power* recently. "He wanted to fight for his country and do anything he could to help out. Texas boys are like that," Caldwell added. "You wanted him at your six o'clock."

Wall was quickly posted to HAL-3 Detachment 2 at Nha Be, a small base located 20 miles southeast of Saigon in the Rung Sat Special Zone. One of the detachment's principal missions was to prevent Viet Cong units from attacking "special interest" merchant ships transiting the lengthy shipping channel leading from the South China Sea to the country's capital city—and one of South Vietnam's largest ports.

Detachment life for a Seawolf helicopter door gunner entailed numerous aerial patrols interspersed with daily close-air support missions. A door gunner's ability to "walk" .50-caliber door-mounted machine-gun fire to within a few yards of units in contact often meant success or failure, life or death, for U.S. and South Vietnamese forces. For Wall, there also were long, hot hours of helicopter maintenance and ordnance work on the flight line between missions. His monthly basic pay was \$249.

Wall was severely wounded by enemy ground fire on a mission north of Nha Be in October 1970. Prompt action by his fellow door gunner saved his life. As it was, Wall nearly bled to death before his combat-damaged aircraft could return to base. He spent two months recovering in a Navy hospital—but again asked to return to duty with the Seawolves.

When HAL-3 experienced a shortage of qualified door gunners early in 1971, Wall again volunteered for flight duty and was assigned to Det 8 at Rac Gia, located on the western coast of South Vietnam on the Gulf of Thailand. During an airstrike on 19 April in support of Operation Tran Hung Dao VI, an enemy round hit a rocket warhead on Wall's side of the helicopter, causing a low-order detonation. Wall received a fatal wound from exploding shrapnel. As the petty officer of the watch at squadron headquarters the next day, it fell to Dennis Caldwell to confirm Wall's identity and, with the squadron duty officer, to sign for the remains of the 20-year-old door gunner.

Petty Officer James A. Wall's sister, Judy Tentecost, lives near her mother's home in Texarkana, Texas, today. One-year younger than her brother, she exchanged hundreds of letters with him during the war. "I saw physical, spiritual, and emotional differences in Jimmie after he was wounded," Tentecost said recently. In his last letter—received the same day she was notified of his death—Tentecost said her brother described his reasons for volunteering to serve in one of the Navy's most highly decorated squadrons. "He believed wholeheartedly in what he was doing," she recounted. "His

letters were filled with passion--yet there was a longing to come home."

Tentecost has several mementos of her brother's service, including a wood-framed shadow box with his 15 military decorations and service medals—including the Distinguished Flying Cross and three Purple Hearts. "Many pieces of his story are missing," she told *Sea Power*, "but I fly his flag in my front yard to remember what he gave. He was a hero."

Learn more about the Seawolves at the Seawolf Association homepage:
www.seawolf.org.



Go to next article:

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