

Man Who Saved Life, Survivor To Meet

Stateside, July 28, 1968, was a typical summer day.

The Boston Red Sox defeated the Washington Senators 10-8 at the capital's D.C. Stadium. Psychedelic rockers Jefferson Airplane played San Francisco. "The Green Berets," with John Wayne, had audiences filling theaters to see a heroic vision of U.S. operations in Vietnam.

Halfway around the world, an Alice man experienced that war without the glory.

Lance Cpl. Henry "Hank" Fletcher, then a 19-year-old attached to Kilo Company, 3rd Battalion, 7th Marines, lay in a patch of grass for six hours that day with a hole in his chest. A rocket-propelled grenade had struck only several feet away, peppering him with shrapnel. His eyes were closing when a young Navy corpsman from Phoenix named Jerry Walker -- who had traversed through automatic and sniper fire to get to Fletcher -- sealed his wound using a pack of cigarettes.

Fletcher survived. Both men left the war behind and started careers and families. Fletcher still lives in Alice and now works as an Exxon Mobil operating technician. Walker, after a career in the Navy, has worked in San Bernardino, Calif., for eight years as a juvenile court judge.

He says he was just doing his job patching up other men that day; Fletcher, however, will meet the man he says saved his life at a company reunion Wednesday in San Antonio. It'll be their first meeting since their days in Vietnam.

Both men easily conjure up memories of the fight. Fletcher -- who gives an animated description -- imitates Russian-made automatic fire. Walker -- who for the most part stays unemotional in his account -- closes his eyes to picture one fatally wounded fellow soldier only feet away. One he didn't get to in time.

Deadly move

At the end of July 28, 1968, 21 of the 115-man Kilo Company were dead, with about 60 wounded. It began with a routine operation to interrogate villagers in the Quang Nam province.

"At the same time we were interrogating villagers, they sent one platoon out to check the rest of the area," said Fletcher, 58.

Fletcher's group was left to watch the 30 villagers when word of hostile fire came -- and with it an order to charge a nearby tree line filled with North Vietnamese troops.

"They told us to get in line and charge, which is very bad," Fletcher said. "You open yourself up like that -- it's a desperation move."

The Americans, cradled by the L-shaped tree line they fired at, immediately were pinned down by automatic fire and RPGs from the foliage. Fletcher's charge toward the tree line was cut short when a rocket exploded a few feet away from him. It was 1 p.m.

"Shrapnel went through my flak jacket," Fletcher said. "I felt the heat from blood running down my chest. That's when I went down."

"I thought I was going to die. I thought about my mother."

Clinging to life

Fletcher had a collapsed left lung. Walker, then 20, went to work, avoiding fire to place battle dressings on wounded men. Corpsmen typically went into the field with about 60 dressings. Walker used all of his, and some others he had to scrounge around for.

"The first several marines I got to -- they were all killed," Walker, 59, said by phone from California. "There was one, he was in this indentation in the ground. Every time I tried to pull him up, they would try to shoot me. That's when I saw Hank."

Walker remembers treating Fletcher because he used his last pack of cigarettes to seal his wound. Fletcher now has his own theory on the bright light some say they see in near-death experiences.

"It's your eyes closing -- and the light is getting smaller," he said. "It would've been just darkness. Then Jerry Walker got to me. He got a clear paper off a cigarette pack, put it on the wound, tied it up with a battle dressing and laid me on my left side so blood would not go to my other lung."

Walker moved on. He spotted one marine, lying wounded only feet away with a heavily bleeding leg wound. A bullet had sliced through his femoral artery.

"He was bleeding, and I'm stuck behind this build up in the dirt, and every time I tried to get out there, somebody puts rounds right in front of me," Walker recalls. "Finally I just said profanity, profanity, profanity and just went. By the time I had got to him, he had bled to death."

He moved on. His fellow corpsman Wayne Caron, 21, was shot in the arm as he moved between wounded men. As he got to another man, he was shot in the leg. He tried to crawl to the aid of another marine when a rocket round killed him.

The death of Caron -- who was awarded a Congressional Medal of Honor -- left the corpsman crew even more short-staffed. Walker and three other corpsmen were left to aid what would end up being around 80 casualties.

True to his calling

"It got kind of frustrating. When I was behind a bump and I'm trying to get someplace, someone keeps trying to blow my head off," Walker said. "I don't think I ever really thought about what I was doing at the time. It was just an obligation you had."

Fletcher stayed conscious the whole time, with enemy fire passing by him and a piece of metal moving around in his chest.

"They were shooting automatic bursts, trying to finish me off," he said. "You could hear them go 'zip!'"

Walker lost track of how many men he treated that day, much less how many of those men lived. It would be hours before two other companies and air support arrived in aid of Kilo Company.

Fletcher, picked up at 7 p.m., arrived at a hospital near Danang about 1:30 a.m.

"Arms gone, legs gone, faces messed up -- you name it," he said, describing the cafeteria-size emergency room. "All the tables were full, from one end to the other."

Hospital officials kept Fletcher in an intensive care unit for six days before he went back into battle. He was wounded two more times before leaving Vietnam that Christmas Eve.

After the battle

In a photo taken the day after the battle at Walker's camp he stands holding a cigarette, wearing the same clothes as the day before, and not smiling for the camera. He would finish out his tour and leave the country in May 1969. After graduating from officer candidate school he went back in January 1973. He stayed there until a month before the United States evacuated Vietnam in 1975.

Fletcher says the battle took his youth and gave him perspective.

"If I'm having a bad day at work, if everything's falling apart, I think of my worst day besides the day my mother died," he said. "The pressure of a job, compared to that day, is nothing."

The Kilo Company holds annual reunions around the country. It will be the first Walker and Fletcher attend. Walker, whose wife is a teacher, learned about it from her as she tried to organize a project in which her students wrote to troops in Iraq.

He steadfastly deflects a sense of pride about what he did that day, although he says he's glad Fletcher's still around. Fletcher is not short in gratitude -- or nerves -- about meeting the corpsman:

"How do you thank the person who saved your life?"