



ALLIES

Newsletter for Members and Friends



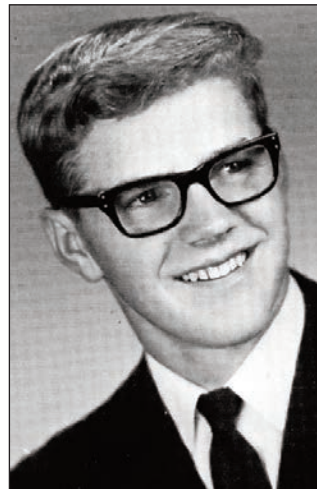
A soldier's story

By Craig Johnson

(Note: This is a story about Lee Kerfeld of Sauk Centre, Minnesota, one of many young Minnesotans who fought in the Vietnam War. At first glance, one might say that there was nothing special about his military service. He joined the Army, did two tours in Vietnam, lost comrades, and returned to civilian life when his enlistment was over. But there is history here, and significance. Lee Kerfeld's experiences, while unique and unrepeatable, typified the service and sacrifices of thousands of Minnesota combat veterans who, like him, faced each day in a hostile, far-off land with courage and hope. Unsung and without fanfare, they dutifully served their nation. This story is told, lest we forget.)¹

In the pre-dawn darkness, U.S. Army troops board UH-1 Hueys for their morning insertion into suspected enemy-held territory. These helicopters are part of the 68th Assault Helicopter Company (Top Tigers) at Bien Hoa Army airfield, north of Saigon, South Vietnam. It is 1968, and the war is at its peak. Leander (Lee) Kerfeld is a door gunner on one of the Hueys. As the helicopters descend into the landing zone (LZ), enemy fire erupts from the tree line. The outer door gunners of the ten "V formation" Hueys open fire with their M-60s to suppress enemy resistance and allow the assault troops to disembark with as few casualties as possible. It is the beginning of a life changing experience for Kerfeld.

Kerfeld, born and raised in Sauk Centre, was a farmer's son. He was used to hard work. Typical of many Minnesota males who matured in the 1960s, he loved to hunt, worked on muscle cars, and listened to rock and roll. When Kerfeld graduated in 1967, the draft waited to welcome him into the service, but he chose not to wait



Lee Kerfeld, left, as a high school graduate. At right, as a door gunner on a Huey in 1968.

and enlisted in the U.S. Army. The reaction from his brothers and sisters was stoic and accepting of the event. When he departed the farm for Basic at Fort Campbell, Kerfeld saw his father—a man of tough German stock—shed a tear for the first time. "You be a good soldier," said his mother. He never forgot it and tried to live up to his mom's goal. Following Advanced Individual Training (AIT) at Fort Knox to become a clerk/typist (71B), he was flown to Vietnam, but after two weeks "in country" counting deuce-and-a-halves, jeeps, and other assorted equipment, Kerfeld stated that that was "not what I signed up to do." Then he volunteered to be a door gunner on a UH-1 Huey.

Kerfeld only had about three minutes of experience on the M-60 machine gun (loading it and pulling the trigger) while in Basic Training. Transitioning to the door gunner position meant learning the weapon and helicopter procedure. For the first two weeks, Kerfeld was on "ash and trash" supply missions in free fire zones. Target practice was "on the job," and flora and fauna were legitimate targets. The M-60s were mounted on bungee cords above the side doors, which allowed firing angles to be straight down, but that made it easier for the door gunner's feet to slip off the skids while in steep, banking turns or to be shot in the legs under their armored seats. On some Hueys, the door gunners shot their own pilots in the

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Kerfeld, left, with Crew Chief Richard Baca

lower legs during these turns. Soon thereafter, the bungee cords were replaced by limiting, fixed mounts. While in the gunner's seat, the door gunner had two flak jackets: one to wear and one to sit on. The reason for the seat protection was obvious to all who flew in the Huey.

Life at Bien Hao Army Airfield was typical for an American GI not patrolling the bush. He lived in a two-story, company-sized hooch with two bunk bays. Being part of an aircrew, Kerfeld was never assigned guard duty or KP. All air crews were on 24-hour alert in case of a mission or the ever-present threat of incoming rockets and mortars. When "incoming" was received, crews ran to the sand-bagged revetments, which protected the UH-1s from shrapnel, and got into the air as soon as possible. During downtime, the door gunners were responsible for cleaning the machine guns, their personal weapons, and keeping the aircraft "cleaned." Cleaning the aircraft often involved swabbing blood from the previous mission off the floor. It was not pleasant.

Assault missions varied from routine, with no opposition, to deadly encounters with the Viet Cong. Intel may proclaim a prospective LZ as unoccupied, but landing the troops there could prove quite different. The first wave of Hueys and their outer door gunners would rake the tree line as a precaution while the first troops disembarked; the next wave of gunners were not allowed to fire because friendly troops were on the ground and muzzle flashes could not determine friend from foe. Often, as

the crews lifted out of the LZ, they would take fire. On one occasion, Kerfeld's Huey was raked from nose-mounted pitot tube to tail rotor. Slugs landed within inches on either side of Kerfeld. He declared, "I was very lucky that day." He and his crew were shot down more than once. When the "Master Caution" lights on the pilot's instrument panel lit up like a Christmas tree, it was time to find a place to put down. The pilots searched for an area that was hopefully far enough away from the fire-fight taking place. They either descended under power, or if necessary, auto-rotated to the ground. Upon landing, the door gunners removed all weapons from the aircraft and set up a defensive perimeter. The crew chief rigged the aircraft for destruction in case the enemy drew near before help arrived. The pilots removed the radios and attempted to make contact for an extraction. The helicopter would later be picked up by a Chinook and brought back for repair. When asked to relate his most difficult mission, Kerfeld hesitated, looked down, and stated, "I don't think I can go through that again."

Kerfeld reflected on one of the pictures included in this article. It shows Kerfeld with his crew chief Richard Baca reclining on the floor of the Huey. Kerfeld thought highly of Sergeant Baca. Baca was a good friend and helped him in his transition to become a door gunner and effective crew member. It was not until the 1990s that Kerfeld discovered that Sergeant Baca was KIA just two months after Kerfeld returned to the States.

Kerfeld was a door gunner for the 68th Top Tigers from April 1968 to April 1969. During that period he was eligible for Rest and Relaxation (R and R) leave. Hawaii, Thailand, Hong Kong, and Australia were possible destinations for American troops. Kerfeld chose Australia. At the reception station in Sydney, the troops were told to keep their noses clean and be good ambassadors of their country, but many forgot those instructions as soon as they stepped out the door to the string of taxis and local "hostesses" waiting for them at the curb. Kerfeld had only \$200 in his pocket, but still managed to have a wonderful time. He came back with money to spare and many good memories, including a comic incident he witnessed at a downtown public square named King's Cross. An R and R GI had dumped an entire box of laundry soap into the bubbling fountain, creating a mountain of suds that flowed down one of the main traffic arteries in the city. The local fire department was eventually called to get rid of the traffic impediment. Kerfeld still laughs at the thought of it. He was just happy to see a place that "was normal."

In the spring of 1969, his Vietnam tour complete, Kerfeld rotated stateside “to the world” and was assigned to Ft. Lewis, Washington, as a training NCO with the 3rd Armored Cavalry. Transition to a routine Army assignment was a big adjustment after a year in combat. Where was the value? The war was still in progress and Kerfeld wanted more than paper-pushing and training. He needed to get back into the fight.

Kerfeld asked for reassignment to Vietnam. His request was granted, and he headed back for a second tour. He hoped to be a Huey door gunner again, but because of his current rank of E-5, that was not a possibility. Instead, he was assigned to the 23rd Infantry (Americal) Division in a clerical/logistics position. Now Kerfeld was responsible for coordination, completion, and the transfer of 201 files belonging to KIA and WIA personnel. He was still pushing paper, but closer to the war. While with the Americal Division, Kerfeld remembered some fun times at the local EM club, where the song “Hey Jude” by the Beatles seemed to always be playing in the background. Kerfeld still hears that song playing in his head.

During this second tour, Kerfeld received a letter from his mother in May 1970. She asked if he had heard of the death (05/22/1970) of his Sauk Centre High School classmate and good friend Robert Frank (Bobby) Marthaler, with whom he often corresponded while in Vietnam. A few days later, he received a letter Bobby had written to him the day before he was killed by a land mine. Specialist Four Marthaler was a medic in the 864th Engineer Battalion. His unit was excavating a ditch when someone hit a mine with a shovel. Several men were wounded or killed. It was a devastating letter for Kerfeld. (The letter is on display at the Sauk Centre Historical Society.) Many of his friends were killed while being “short,” near the end of their tours.



Bobby Marthaler

As he neared the end of his second tour, Kerfeld began to relax emotionally. He looked forward to his return home. When his enlistment ended, he returned to the states to ETS (out-process). While at the out-processing station, he was advised not to wear his uniform while traveling back to Minnesota. The political climate had turned the American public against the war and, unfortunately, the public's

animosity toward anything military was often taken out on the very people who had sacrificed in the service of their country. His family received him with open arms, but the local population ignored the fact that Vietnam veterans were in their presence. Many returning GIs immediately grew longer hair, sported a beard or mustache, and tried to blend into the culture of the time. During the 70s Kerfeld joined a local American Legion and was questioned by WWII vets as to how “you lost that war!” It hurt. While the country wished to forget its involvement in Vietnam, it was impossible for Vietnam vets to do so. Nevertheless, Kerfeld moved on. He married, raised a family, and had a fruitful career in the construction industry. Combat memories haunted him, but through the assistance of a supportive, loving wife, fellow Vietnam vets, and the VA, he successfully confronted his war-related demons.

During 1981 and 1982, Kerfeld continued his service as the Commander of the Sauk Centre VFW post. He is a member of the Little Sauk American Legion Post 417, is active in the Disabled American Veterans organization, and helps local vets returning from the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. He attends reunions of the 68th Top Tigers every two years and has visited the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C. several times. One story that Kerfeld related shows how attitudes have changed toward support of our military. He attended the send-off ceremony for C Company, 1st Combined Arms Battalion, 194th Armor, at the Sauk Centre High School auditorium. Governor Tim Pawlenty was there along with the soon-to-be-deployed soldiers, their families, and friends. As Kerfeld sat in the back of the auditorium, his emotions stirred. He was happy for the Guard troops because of the backing they were receiving, but he was also a little envious. His generation, too, had stepped up to the plate and dutifully served, and although things had begun to change in recent years, Vietnam vets had never been given the public recognition and respect they earned—and certainly deserved.

Craig Johnson of Grey Eagle is a retired 7th grade history teacher who volunteers at the museum as a tour guide for visiting school groups. He has known Kerfeld since high school and credits him with influencing Johnson to become a Huey crew chief while in the Minnesota National Guard.

¹ More than 68,000 Minnesotans served in the Vietnam War. Approximately 8,000 were wounded; 1,077 were killed; 17 remain unaccounted for.

CURATOR'S NOTES

By Doug Bekke



The next several years are going to be very busy for the curatorial staff. Recently \$41,000 in state legacy grant money was received to restart and complete the transfer of the collection catalog to a computerized system.

Preparations continue to modify, update, and move the 34th Infantry Division exhibit to the new addition on the post's education building. This should be completed in November.

The 34th Division exhibit will be replaced by a special exhibit on the Vietnam War with an early summer of 2015 opening date. My concept for this exhibit will be to briefly start with a review of the French Indo-China experience, early Communist influence in Vietnam as well as Vietnamese nationalism. Then, in over 90 percent of the exhibit, we will use the words and pictures of Minnesota veterans to tell a more personal chronology of the war. So far the earliest Minnesota veteran connection is 1945 when an OSS team member parachuted into Hanoi just

before VJ Day. Next a 1954 Navy veteran evacuating Christians, French, and non-communists from Haiphong Harbor, then a few late 1950s and early 60s experiences. Most of the exhibit will cover the build-up and heavy fighting, then concluding with the withdrawal and fall of Saigon. I intend to include newer Minnesotans—SE Asian allied refugees—in the exhibit, too. Collecting the stories and photos will be a huge undertaking, but we've done almost none of this period work in the past. Beyond the exhibit, the histories and photos collected will become a long overdue part of the museum archive where they will be preserved for future generations.

We continue to seek male and female uniforms and insignia actually worn by all branches of the service in, to and home from Vietnam. We are also seeking uniforms and equipment of the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese and of our allies.

Farther into the future I continue to plan and collect for the special WWI exhibit to open in 2016, marking the 100th anniversary of the war. It will actually begin with the mobilization of Minnesotans for the Mexican border in 1916, then go through the world war at home and overseas, and ending with the military's homecoming and the 1918-19 flu epidemic.

We continue to seek volunteer professional wood working help for wooden spoke wheel restoration.

Did you "Give to the Max" for the Minnesota Military Museum?

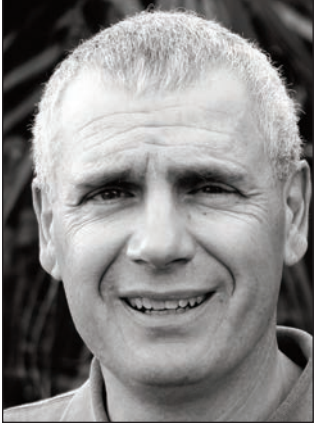
Were you one of over 52,000 donors who participated in "Give to the Max" day on November 15, 2013? A record \$17 million was raised for 4,437 Minnesota non-profits and schools in the fifth year of this statewide fundraising event. The Give to the Max website crashed and was down for most of the afternoon, but in spite of that, 20 donors got through and gave \$3,230 to the museum. Most of it was matched by our grant from the St. Paul Foundation. On top of that, we received an additional \$1,000 "Golden Ticket" for one of our donor's donations that was randomly drawn between 11:00 and 12:00 am from all donations given during that hour. A total of 24 Golden Tickets were awarded to participating non-profits and schools during the 24-hour event. If you were unable to participate this year, please plan on trying to win a Golden Ticket for us next year on November 13, 2014.



Steve Osman is shown with two GiveMN staffers at a special breakfast given in Bloomington for Golden Ticket winners. He accepted a check for \$1,000 on behalf of the museum. At right is Cyndi Leshner, chairman of the board at GiveMN, and at left is Dana Nelson, executive director.

DIRECTOR'S UPDATE

By Jeff Thielen



Happy new year to all of our great supporters from the staff and volunteers at the museum! We hope this edition of Allies finds you in good health and humor and that 2014 keeps you that way.

Last year at this time, my Update talked about sending the newsletter out electronically. We hope this has worked well for you and that

you are passing on the electronic version to friends and families.

We continue to improve our electronic media usage and had great success during last fall's Give to the Max day by passing on our message to all of those who have provided us with an email address.

If you have not looked at our website lately, please do so and check out the link to the new video we were able to produce with the help of Veterans 4 Veterans. We have sent this video to all of the public and local access televi-

sion stations in Minnesota and also to all of the County Veterans Service Officers. The purpose of the 12-minute video is to increase veterans' awareness of the museum. We hope you enjoy it and are able to share it through social media to increase its exposure. If you would like a copy of the DVD, please contact us.

This coming year will be exceptionally busy for us at the museum. We received a second "Legacy Grant" from the state's Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund, allowing us to finish up the inventory and computerization of our artifact records. We have begun the hiring process for individuals to complete that project and hope to have someone in place by March 1. We were also informed by Don Kerr of the Department of Military Affairs at the November Board meeting that we will be receiving a grant to assist with our operational efforts. This grant money comes from the Support Our Troops Minnesota license plates and is distributed to the Dept. of Military Affairs and Dept. of Veterans Affairs for programs supportive of military men and women in the state. The money will enable us to place an on-going exhibit on the 34th Infantry Division in an addition being constructed for Camp Ripley Education Center, and to prepare new museum exhibits commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Vietnam War and the 100th anniversary of WWI.

As always, please stop by when you have time. We value your interest and support.



VOLUNTEERS AND STAFF ENJOY GALA APPRECIATION DINNER

Museum volunteers, staff, and spouses were joined by board members at the annual Appreciation Dinner held November 15, 2013, at the Camp Ripley Community Center. A steak dinner was preceded by a reception hosted by board president Nick Ostapenko. Following dinner, executive director Jeff Thielen handed out President's Volunteer Service Award pins and certificates for Bronze, Silver, and Gold levels of service. Top honors went to Kerry Beckenbach of Rice, who logged 496 hours as a museum volunteer during the previous twelve months. The gala evening was topped off with a series of door prizes.

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OUT OF THE ARCHIVES

By Chad Conrady



Since starting as the museum's archivist, I have discovered some great records that will become valuable resources once those collections are processed and made available for researchers. With each of these newsletter updates, I will highlight some materials from the collection that will soon become publicly available. At this point, I have been working to process and create a contents list for records of the Minnesota Adjutant General's Of-

fice (circa 1930-1970). These include claims submitted for state government benefits for veterans just prior to World War II, such as a veteran bonus and the issuing of government headstones. While some of the forms were not

filled out in full, the most complete forms provide helpful information for genealogists, including the veteran's name, date and location of enlistment and discharge, rank, regiment, company, and the location and name of the cemetery that the veteran rests in. Often these forms are accompanied by a letter from the veteran's family requesting assistance in acquiring the benefits. For example, one such letter was sent to the Adjutant General's Office by the nine year old daughter of a World War I veteran, Benjamin L. Hendricks. She wrote a decade after her father's death to request his survivor's benefits. In response to the inquiry, the Adjutant General's Office wrote back, instructing her to have her legally appointed guardian, or her mother, fill out the form and return it to the office. This is one of the more complete records, as the form that the mother and daughter co-completed and returned is also included.

In the coming months, finding aids for this, as well as other collections, will be made available through the Minnesota Military Museum's website. Stay tuned for new updates on interesting finds and available records.



NEW MUSEUM VIDEO

Thanks to a grant from Veterans 4 Veterans, the society has created a professionally produced 12-minute video that tells the museum's story to veterans and others interested in learning more about the museum's work. "The Minnesota Military Museum ... where heroes live on" tours the exhibits and explains how the society fosters preservation and understanding of Minnesota's military history. You can see it on YouTube or go to mnmilitarymuseum.org.

DONOR HONOR ROLL, OCT. 1 - DEC. 31

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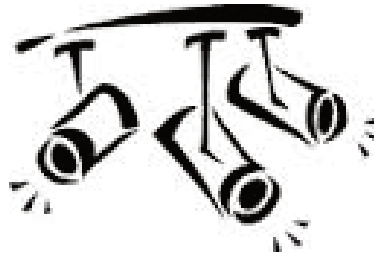
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SPOTLIGHTED RECENT DONATIONS

During the summer we received a WWII German an MP44 Sturmgewehr submachine gun, found in a suburban storage locker. This was a revolutionary weapon long sought for our collection.

Then a few months later a phone call from a man who wished to donate a nearly identical MP43 brought home from WWII by his father. We are currently working on the transfer documents on the MP43.

Earlier in the year we received a classic long-sought-after M-1917A1 U.S. water cooled machinegun, 99% complete, from the Cass County Sheriff's Office and American Legion. After a good going over by volunteer John Deuhs, it looks great. It was just put on exhibit this fall.

The Pietz family of St. Cloud donated the beautiful USMC uniforms of LTC Reuel Pietz, a Marine aviator who flew from WWII through the early Vietnam era.

In November, out of the walls of an old house in Sartel, came the supply records of the 8th Minnesota Infantry in the Civil War as well as personal papers of Cpt. George Fisk, the regimental supply officer. The documents had been used as wall insulation! They now have a better home.

ALLIES

Allies is published for the members and friends of the Minnesota Military Museum.

Nicholas Ostapenko, **President**
Jeff Thielen, **Executive Director**
Doug Bekke, **Curator**
Chad Conrady, **Archivist**
Sandy Erickson, **Administrator**
Al Zdon, **Editor**

The **Military Historical Society of Minnesota** is a nonprofit 501 (c) (3) organization, registered with the federal and state governments. Donations are tax deductible.

Military Historical Society of Minnesota
C/O Minnesota Military Museum
Camp Ripley, 15000 Hwy. 115
Little Falls MN 56345-4173

Museum contact information:

TO:

Telephone: 320-616-6050
DSN: 871-7374
Fax: 320-632-7797
Email: connect@mnmilitarymuseum.org
Website: www.mnmilitarymuseum.org

Two join MHSM board; two long-time board members depart

We are pleased to announce two additions to the board of directors of the Military Historical Society of Minnesota while reluctantly acknowledging the resignations of two others. Joining the board is Douglas R. Hanson of Atwater. Hanson is the general manager of KDJS AM/FM, Willmar, and KRVY FM, Alexandria, and also a retired Command Sergeant Major in the Minnesota Army National Guard. Also new to the board is Dr. Jon van der Hagen of Baxter. Jon is a general practitioner in the Brainerd area who, for the past two years, has also been a stalwart museum volunteer. Stepping down after nearly 11 years on the board is Janese Evans, Plymouth, founder/president of Strategic Toolbox, a Minneapolis-based business consulting firm. For the past six years, Janese has been our vice president for finance. Lee Smith, a military historian and retired MDOT engineer from Blaine, is also stepping down. Smith was on the board for almost 18 years and served in a volunteer capacity as our archivist from 1999-2013. Thank you, Janese and Lee, for your many years of dedicated

service, and welcome, Doug and Jon.

Tim Meininger, Duluth, has been elected to replace Evans as vice president for finance. Meininger is vice president of Beacon Bank and past president/chair of the Duluth Chamber of Commerce.



Lee Smith (right) accepts a special token of appreciation at the November board meeting from Nick Ostapenko in recognition of Smith's service as museum archivist.