

Dusting off his heroes

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For The Times

Vietnam vet lauds helicopter medics who saved his life

Fred Castleberry of Huntsville came home from Vietnam without his right arm and his left leg, and spent the next year and a half in the hospital in a body cast.

If not for the bravery of the medical helicopter team that rescued him, Castleberry, 58, knows he would not have come home at all.

April 14, 1968, was Easter Sunday and Castleberry's 21st birthday. As a drill sergeant who had joined the army at 17, he was working with the 25th Infantry Division as a "tunnel rat" when the group came under fire.

"I was hit by a sniper. Then I was hit by a machine gun. Then I was hit by a rocket-propelled grenade," Castleberry said. "I just kept getting up and fighting."

When he was struck in the shoulder, "It felt like a bee sting," he said. When he was hit by a grenade, it felt more surreal. "You're running as fast as you can with your eyes closed and hit a wall," he said. "You saw stars."

He remembers lying down with his boot under his head and being rescued by ground medics who told him he wouldn't survive his injuries. "They told me, 'We've done all we can do for you. Prepare for your death,' " said Castleberry, who said farewell in his mind to his mother and grandmother. Then he heard the sound of a descending helicopter. A ground medic told Castleberry the Dustoff Medics were coming for him.

"I said, 'No, they're not, because the firefights too heavy,' " he recalled. "Well, they did."

Castleberry saw the lights of the helicopter and the continuing gunfire as it landed. "I could actually see the sparks flying from the helicopter as it was descending, the enemy bullets flying off of it," he said.

A medic jumped out of the helicopter and quickly loaded Castleberry on board. The copter immediately ascended, taking shots all the while. Castleberry remembers hearing words of comfort - "You're going to make it, buddy; hang in there," from the medic, whose face was bloody. He first thought the blood was his own, but soon realized the medic was also injured, but was tending only to his patient.

The crew took Castleberry to a nearby hospital, a measure that undoubtedly saved his life. His arm and leg were amputated and he was transported to Texas, where he spent a year and a

half in a body cast in a rat-infested hospital.

After his release, Castleberry dedicated the next six years to drug addiction and wallowing in self-pity, but he eventually snapped out of it. He graduated from the University of Kentucky and excelled at careers in drug enforcement and child advocacy. Today, he is retired, married with two grown children, and an active motivational speaker.

Castleberry earned a Purple Heart in Vietnam but on Veterans Day, he will also receive a Silver Star for valor in battle as he is inducted into the Madison County Hall of Heroes. Yet he modestly cites others as the heroes in his tale.

"The reason I'm breathing today is because of those brave soldiers who decided that my life was as important as theirs," Castleberry said. "They do it every day in Iraq."

Dustoff Medics currently get an air medal, just as all flight crews do, but Castleberry and a host of others believe they deserve something much more prestigious.

"These people risk their lives, and they go in unarmed," Castleberry said. "We want them to have a badge of their own so that everyone that sees them knows they are part of a very elite group called Dustoff."

Dustoff Medics rescued an estimated 900,000 soldiers during the Vietnam War. Jack M. Grass of Huntsville, a 20-year veteran and Army CW 3 who later spent 20 years as a NASA contractor, was a Dustoff pilot in Vietnam.

Grass, who turns 64 on Friday, estimates that his crew conducted between 3,000 and 3,500 rescues, about half of which took place in a "hot area" where landing was extremely dangerous.

Although he and Castleberry have never met face to face, the two are among a group of veterans rallying for legislation that will honor Dustoff crews with the prestigious "Combat Aeromedical Badge" for bravery and accomplishments.

The badge was modeled after combat medical and infantry badges that were established in the 1940s by the war department and given specifically to medical personnel assigned or attached to a medical detachment of the infantry. But for bureaucratic reasons, they say, the badge is not awarded to crews who may deserve it most, the Dustoff Medivacs.

"These rescues are almost always single ship missions, in all weather conditions, night or day, into firefights and battles, to treat the wounded," Grass said.

The U.S. House of Representatives has passed a bill authorizing the new Dustoff badge, but the bill has yet to reach the U.S. Senate. Last week Grass wrote his third letter on the matter to U.S. Sen. Richard Shelby, R-Tuscaloosa.

Both Castleberry and Grass are passionate about the need to honor Dustoff Medics with the Combat Aeromedical Badge.

"These guys are in the back protecting patients as they're loading, protecting pilots as they're loading," Grass said. "They're just unsung heroes, each and every one of them."

They urge all who agree to write a persuasive letter to Shelby at senator@shelby.senate.gov.