

Piece of veteran's identity returns from the past



Jim Sulima, electronics mechanic, is a recipient of a lost and found piece of memorabilia. One of his dog tags was returned 40 years after being lost in Vietnam. (Photo illustration by Steve Grzedzinski)

by Jennifer Caprioli
Staff Writer

Forty years ago a dog tag was lost in Vietnam. In September that tag was returned to its rightful owner.

As of August, Tours of Peace (TOP) has retrieved over 1,800 lost dog tags belonging to Vietnam veterans. Over 300 of these tags have been returned to veterans and their families. Jim Sulima is one of those recipients of a lost and found piece of memorabilia.

Sulima, an electronics mechanic in the Communications Systems Directorate's Satellite Communications Division, has worked at the depot for 32 years. After graduating in 1967 from Pittston Area High School, Sulima received his draft notice. He entered the Army and began basic training at Fort Dix, N.J. He received advanced training in artillery and forward observation at Fort Sill, Okla. In 1968 Sulima began a 14-month tour in Vietnam. Upon arrival he was assigned to the 101st Airborne Division as a forward observer on Long Range Patrol, and was sent to Khe San to reinforce the base.

While stationed in Khe San, Sulima was hit with shrapnel in the chest, face and neck. While under medical care, one of his two dog tags was removed for identification. When he was released, he only had one tag in his possession.

After being wounded and hospitalized for a second time during the war, Sulima returned home in 1969. He did not realize that his second dog tag had also been taken from him. "I never wondered what happened to the tags," he says. "I never even thought about it."

In May 2007 Sulima received a letter from TOP Vietnam Veterans, an independent, nonprofit organization founded in 1998 by a Vietnam veteran. The letter stated that one of his dog tags was found.

TOP travels to Vietnam where they uncover personal effects such as dog tags and miscellaneous items, including clothing or pay cards left behind during the war. Members of the organization research and attempt to return these effects to families and veterans through their Web site and letters.

"When I first received the letter, I felt funny. It brought back so many memories," he said, recalling things he had pushed from his mind for four decades.

Sulima went on TOP's Web site and filled out a form. The tag was returned a year later, after correspondence with TOP personnel and identity verification. He noticed a dent in the tag, which he attributes to the shrapnel that hit him 40 years earlier.

Because dog tags have up to 13 pieces of information on them, including the Soldier's military identification number, name, social security number, blood type, religion, gas mask size and branch of service, TOP needed verification from Sulima. They stress that the military identification number and/or social security number are important because they are the sure way to pair the tag with its owner.

Once TOP receives confirmation information from the veteran or family, they return the dog tag. Representatives from the organization sought Jim out after they found his tag in Vietnam over a year ago. The letter he received

stated, "We are searching for him or his nearest next-of-kin, so we can send his tag home, in honor of his service." The letter also explained that the organization does not require charges or costs. "We return this dog tag as a public service in recognition of your service in Vietnam," the letter stated.

His brother, Jerry Sulima, is happy that the tag was found because Jim did not talk about his time in Vietnam until recently, when the tag was returned.

"This helped him open up to our family, which also helped him decide to share his story with other depot employees and people we know," he says. Jerry suggested to Jim that veterans in a similar situation could benefit from his story.

TOP participants integrate emotional and humanitarian aspects by revisiting old military sites of personal meaning, and conducting humanitarian projects nearby.

The organization believes in educating the public about Vietnam veterans and family issues, the war, and present-day Vietnam. TOP believes that "by helping others, we help ourselves."

Sulima believes that finding the tag has helped him heal and describes his time spent in Vietnam as a book that he is now able to close after 40 years.

While in Vietnam, Jim earned two purple hearts and a Bronze Star for valor. He plans on passing his medals and other memorabilia, and the tag, to his children. He hopes that one day he will receive a similar letter regarding his second tag and its homecoming, so he can pass that on also.

For more about TOP or to search for a lost dog tag, go to www.topvietnamveterans.org.

Tobyhanna participates in Ready Army Program, distributes literature

by Jennifer Caprioli
Staff Writer

This year the Army has partnered with the Ready Campaign to form the Ready Army Program.

The depot is participating by displaying posters throughout the premises, distributing literature to more than 30 on-post buildings, and issuing information during community events, says Paul Ringheiser. He is the fire chief in the Industrial Risk Management Directorate's Fire and Emergency Services Division.

In observance of National Preparedness Month, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security launched the fifth annual Ready Campaign.

During the month of September Americans are encouraged to plan for disasters and emergencies at home, businesses and in communities. Since April, more than 700 organizations have joined the National Preparedness Month Coalition.

Last year, the Ready Campaign partnered with national, regional, state and local governmental organizations, Ringheiser said. Agencies such as the American Red Cross and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have educated Americans through events, essay contests, festivals and discussions.

The program expands on the preparedness message of the campaign and is the Ad Council's most successful campaign.

This year's theme is to keep the Army strong by preparing Army families and communities for hazards, disasters and emergencies. The purpose of the campaign is to "increase awareness of resources available to protect our Army community."

Recent events such as Hurricane Katrina and the Midwest tornados highlight the need for complete emergency preparedness. The campaign provides tool-kit checklists for emergency preparedness at home and abroad. Also, the Army has supplied a policy, resources and guidance that will organize the community for situations during peacetime and time of conflict, adds Ringheiser. Checklists for emergency kits and preparedness plans, along with posters, brochures and fact sheets are available online at www.acism.army.mil/readyarmy/.

The Ready Campaign also houses Ready Kids, which offers parent and teacher resource guides, activity sheets, magnets and bookmarks for children in fourth to sixth grade.

Ready is a national public service advertising campaign produced in partnership with the Ad Council. It is designed to educate and empower Americans to prepare for and respond to emergencies, including natural disasters and potential

terrorist attacks.

The campaign's Web sites, www.ready.gov and www.fema.gov/plan, and toll-free numbers, 1-800-BE-READY and 1-888-SE-LISTO, provide Americans with free emergency preparedness information. There is also an Emergency Preparedness Video available to employees on the intranet's "What's New" section.

Ready Army would like to remind Americans that emergency preparedness is everyone's responsibility and a prepared Army family supports our deployed Soldiers.

