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Piece of veteran's identity returns from the past

by Jennifer Caprioli
Staff Writer

[TOBYHANNA ARMY DEPOT](#), Pa. — 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 (a resident of Hughesstown) 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 Army Depot is the largest full-service Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (C4ISR) maintenance and logistics support facility in the Department of Defense. Employees repair, overhaul and fabricate electronics systems and components, from tactical field radios to the ground terminals for the defense satellite communications network.

Tobyhanna's missions support all branches of the Armed Forces. The depot is the Army Center of Industrial and Technical Excellence (CITE) for Communications-Electronics, Avionics, and Missile Guidance and Control Systems and the Air Force Technology Repair Center (TRC) for ground communications and electronics.

About 5,800 personnel are employed at Tobyhanna, which is located in the Pocono Mountains of northeastern Pennsylvania.

Tobyhanna Army Depot is part of the U.S. Army CECOM Life Cycle Management Command. Headquartered at Fort Monmouth, N.J., the command's mission is to research, develop, acquire, field and sustain communications, command, control, computer, intelligence, electronic warfare and sensors capabilities for the Armed Forces.

PHOTO CAPTION:

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).