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Haunting memento returned

Vietnam vet's dog tag comes home

By Erin Alberty
Gazette Writer

HOUGHTON — Mel Tatrow's last battle cost him a lot.

The Calumet native eventually died from injuries he sustained in the Viet Cong attack that blew off his legs. And prevailing attitudes in 1970 muffled the thanks he might have received for serving his country as a U.S. Marine.

That's why his sister, Acyne Tatrow Yrjana, is thrilled to finally recover a piece of what Mel left behind in Vietnam: the dog tag nailed to the boot he was wearing when he saw his legs for the last time.

"I was just ... so honored to hold it, knowing my brother had sacrificed his legs for me and for all of us," Acyne, or "Ace," said from her home in Arlington, Texas. "And this small little tag made it clean around the world back to me. It's like finding a needle in a haystack after 34 years."

Ace recovered the tag through Tours of Peace Vietnam Veterans, or TOP, an organization that helps veterans and their families recover from the trauma of the Vietnam war.

Ace's husband, Jim Yrjana, found Mel's name on a list on TOP's Web site after the the missing dog tag came up in a dinner conversation this spring. The Yrjanas contacted the group to identify Mel. A month later, the tag arrived in the mail.

"I can't explain how it felt to know that 34 years later, I was holding the tag that my brother had last touched when he put it on his boot," Ace said. "I just cried like a baby."

It may have been 34 years, but Ace remembers the day she and her family found Mel in a Philadelphia military hospital, missing the legs that had propelled him through track, hockey and baseball in Calumet.

"There had to be 30 beds on each side with men, young boys, missing arms, fingers, hands," Ace said. "Their lives were just starting, and to have to start them off that way. There was a man across from my brother who lost both legs, his arm and he was blind. I often wonder how he's doing, wonder if he ever married."

Mel himself didn't marry, but those who knew him say he continued life as if he faced no handicap.

"We went on hunting, trapping, fishing, chasing women," recalled Neil Isaacson, a lifelong friend of Mel. The two signed up for the Marine Corps together and were sent to Vietnam in 1969, right out of high school.

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Neil was blinded in an attack just months after Mel lost his legs. They returned to Calumet and then hit the road, traveling throughout the country like “another version of Route 66,” Neil said.

“We both realized, well, I can’t see no more, he’s got no legs. We’ll just have to make the best of a bad situation,” Neil said. “We weren’t going to sit in the corner crying about it, because it’s not going to change anything.”

Mel died in 2000 when he strained an artery that was damaged in the attack that took his legs. He is buried in the veterans’ section in the Lakeview Cemetery in Calumet.

“He is very proud to be a Marine,” Ace said. “He felt that was his duty to go and serve his country.”

Ace said that Mel’s name may be added to the Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial in Washington, D.C. because he died from a war-related injury.

But, she said, recognition could have been timelier.

— *For a complete version of this story, please see the print edition of The Daily Mining Gazette.*

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