

The Bandera PROPHEET

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Veteran recalls two Vietnam tours, fighting in the field and catching waves

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The Bandera Prophet

Still proud of his long hair, streaked with blonde and white highlights, John Perkins is a man of truth and optimism. The Michigan native is a self-professed hippie, a Marine who received his draft papers while he was already in boot camp, and a surfer who caught some choice waves while serving in Vietnam.

“I joined the Marine Corps in 1966. I knew the draft was coming,” Perkins said. “Within six months I was in Vietnam. My base camp was in Da Nang, right on the beach. I was allowed to bring my surf board from home, so I did a lot of surfing while I was there.”

Perkins served two terms in Vietnam, ending his military career in 1970. The radio operator spent most of his tour “pushing the bush,” out in the field. He came down with malaria in 1968, suffering a 106-degree fever with symptoms he continues to endure today.

“I still have relapses when my immune system drops,” the 75-year-old said, who attempted to sign up for a third tour in Vietnam, but was denied because of his health. “I’m not allowed to give blood. But I can receive it.”

In 1980, he and his wife, whom he married in between his first and second tours, filed for Agent Orange benefits.

“We were told we had to prove it with photos that showed a timeline,” Perkins said. “I didn’t have many photos from when I was in Vietnam, so we dropped it.”

When he was diagnosed with an aggressive cancer years later, he said the military could no longer deny it.

“I lost my bladder over it,” Perkins said. “The treatment also destroyed my prostate, so they took that too.”

Perkins was also stationed at Camp Lejeune, N.C. He was exposed to the toxic water now infamously part of a nationwide class action lawsuit, but he is not part of the settlement. If he participates, he would lose other benefits he receives, and he can't risk that.

With his wife, Perkins moved to Texas in 2018 to escape the cold Michigan winters. Her sister later joined them.

“I like it down here,” he said.

Also fleeing those Michigan winters is Perkins' brother, who snowbirds in Florida. Drafted into the Marine Corps in 1965, Perkins' brother came home injured in 1966, paving the way for the second Perkins to go overseas.

“As long as a family member was home, another one could be sent,” he said.

Perkins said his brother lost half of his face in Vietnam after members of his unit stepped on a land mine. He has had reconstructive surgery, but the Michigan winters are too harsh for him now.

“It was a time in our history that we did not want. People sometimes ask me, ‘should it have happened?’ But when you see how people live there, and see how we live here, then you know why we were there,” Perkins said.

Now, the proud father, grandfather of 10 and great grandfather of 10 is preparing to travel to Michigan to pick up his oldest daughter and three of his grandchildren.

“They will spend the summer with us,” he said, adding he looks forward to spending time with his family. “I wanted a dozen kids, but my wife didn't, so we stopped at three.”

Perkins often attends events at the Bandera American Legion Post 157, sharing some stories, and listening to others.

“I think that opening up and talking about it is therapeutic,” he said.

“There were a lot of things that happened in Vietnam that I locked away, and they have to stay there.”