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[Safety](#)
[Pressroom](#) (web)

[CEO Hotline](#)
[Metro Projects](#)
[Facts at a Glance](#)
(web)

[Archives](#)
[Events Calendar](#)
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[Metro Cafe](#) (pdf)

[Metro Classifieds](#)
[Retirement Round-up](#)

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[Strategic Plan](#) (pdf)

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[Training](#)
[Help Desk](#)
[Intranet Policy](#)

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From Vietnam to Desert Storm, Metro Veterans Share Wartime Experiences

By RICH MORALLO

It was his first firefight in Vietnam in 1967 and 20-year old hospital corpsman Jon Vandercook was scared.

"I was in the middle of a fire fight, tending to a marine lieutenant who had just taken a bullet in his head," remarked Vandercook, today a Metro senior safety specialist. Meanwhile, Metro bus operator Edward York, another Armed Forces veteran, also talked about coming under fire as a young Navy machinist's mate when his ship arrived in Da Nang Harbor in 1972.



Vandercook, York and other Metro South Bay members who served in the military shared some of their experiences recently in honor of Military Veterans Appreciation Day on November 11.

A Marine forever

Henry Prater served three tours as a marine in Vietnam in the 1960s. "Bullets shot through our cargo plane when I was there in 1964," said Prater, an equipment maintenance supervisor at Carson Division 18. Prater's job was to set up refueling stations for helicopter missions. He was aboard an Army cargo plane carrying supplies and equipment near Da Nang when he heard bullets burst through the walls of the plane.

"Earlier I had positioned an aluminum fuel filter that I was transporting behind the plane's cockpit. That filter saved the pilot's and co-pilot's lives as the bullets ended up lodged in the filter," narrated Prater who would go on to serve 21 years and



Div. 18 Equipment Maintenance supervisor Henry Prater.

seven months in the Marines.



Div. 18 Bus Operator Leslie Auzenne

Dental assistant

Helping process marines for Desert Storm/Desert Shield in Saudi Arabia, Division 18 bus operator Leslie Auzenne worked as a dental assistant in San Diego from 1988 to 1992. "I joined the Navy for administrative office training but my high placement scores landed me a job as a dental technician," said Auzenne who spent most of her tour coordinating the dental screening of newly recruited marines.

"I loved serving the military," said Auzenne, also responsible for assisting in dental surgeries, processing x-rays, and cleaning teeth during her tour of duty. The Los Angeles resident recommends the military to high school graduates looking for a way to start their careers. "My son, who's in college, plans to go to law school and eventually join the Navy and serve in the Judge Advocate General Corps.

The Navy called

Like Auzenne, York also operates a Division 18 bus and served in the Navy. "I worked on hydraulic systems, submarine periscopes, airplanes and aircraft elevators," he said. "I was originally drafted by the Army but after I tested for both the Navy and the Air Force, the Navy was the first to call me in," said York.

York remembers like it was just yesterday when he first saw the shores of Vietnam in October 1972. "There were 200 of us on our subtender as we approached Da Nang Harbor. We could hear the enemy shooting at us from shore," remarked York. The bus operator, who served in the Philippines, Australia, Spain, Thailand and Africa, also has family currently in uniform.



Div. 18 Bus Operator Ed York. Inset: In the Navy, 1972.

"My son in in the Army in Iraq now," said York. "I'm looking forward to his return in February."

Tank mechanic

Paul Aldana and Thomas Fox, bus operators with Arthur Winston Division 5, also served in the military. "As a Marine tank mechanic

I was always right behind the combat units during Desert Storm/Desert Shield in 1991," said Fox who maintained the main turret, hydraulics and gear box of tanks. Fox's other military tours included Japan, Korea and Hawaii.



Div 5 Operators Paul Aldana, above, and, right, Thomas Fox.



"I was an Army truck driver in Okinawa in 1969," said Aldana who worked 15-hour days loading ships with medical supplies and ammunition bound for Vietnam. "I operated this huge 15-ton one-floor high truck tractor that could move trailers and supply boxes onto the ships," Aldana said.

Provided emergency treatment

With bullets flying overhead that Vietnam June day in 1967 Vandercook focused on providing emergency treatment to the wounded officer and prepared him for evacuation.

"Sleeping in a hole full of water during the monsoon. Climbing mountains and wading through rice paddies while carrying a five-gallon water can, mortar rounds and machine gun ammo in addition to my medical gear and M-14 rifle. Patching up wounded Marines and identifying dead comrades. These are my memories of Vietnam," said Vandercook.

Vandercook was later commissioned, and with 31 years of military service will retire as a commander in January.