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San Gabriel Valley Division 9 Assistant Maintenance Manager Rich Herpers holds up a platoon photo from his time in Vietnam. A very young Rich Herpers is third from the left in the front row.

and what they did in Europe.

"So that's what I did. And that's where I ended up – 82nd Airborne," he recalls.

Then, in 1961, after three years of service with the 82nd, Herpers left the Army, thinking he'd done his duty, and found a job in a bank's computer division.

But Herpers was "bored to death." So when the Vietnam War started escalating, Herpers voluntarily re-enlisted in 1964. He took an "easy" job in the Army's financial world.

But the lure of action – and the added pay bonus of being on parachute status – proved too much for Herpers. He soon found himself in Vietnam in Special Forces, beginning six years "in country."

Vietnam Part I

His first assignment was with a reconnaissance unit. Herpers and his team (usually 12 men) would head into dangerous regions trying to learn the lay of the land and assessing enemy strength.

Career Army Veteran Reflects on Military Service

Many Americans will spend Independence Day thinking of the service of our armed forces. Army Special Forces veteran Rich Herpers requires no special day to remind him.

By JIMMY STROUP

(July 3, 2008) Inspired by a neighbor, San Gabriel Valley Division 9 Assistant Maintenance Manager Rich Herpers joined the Army in 1958. Just 17 years old, he was too young to enlist without his parent's permission.

"I wanted to go in as a paratrooper," Herpers says. "My neighbor was this little Irish guy, really small, and he told me all about how he was in the 82nd Airborne,

Generally, each reconnaissance mission lasted five days. Two days of down time – if they were lucky – and then back into the field, always pressing forward.

"Sometimes we weren't even down an hour before we had to get pulled out on the string [by helicopter]," Herpers says.

Near the end of his time with the reconnaissance unit, Herpers was wounded.

"I didn't even know it," Herpers recalls. "The adrenaline was pumping, you know. We get pulled out and my friend says to me, 'Rich, what happened to your knee?'"

Bombed and wounded

"I look down and my left knee's got this hole through it," he says. "I don't know if it was a bullet or some chunk of tree that hammered it. They [had] dropped a 500-pound [bomb] on us, so the trees were exploding."

Herpers spent nine days recuperating and then was back in the field.

Stateside in 1968 and some of 1969, Herpers managed to squeeze in some R&R, some training and a wedding. The wedding seems to have been a good idea, as Herpers and his wife Billha are soon to celebrate their 40th anniversary.

"She was teaching Hebrew in a language program in Washington D.C. when we met," Herpers said. "Soon after, I was back to Vietnam. The military is hard on families that way. Lots of time away, lots of stress."

Vietnam Part II

Herpers' second trip to Vietnam lasted another three years: 1969 to 1971. This time he was assigned to a Special Forces outfit designed for direct contact with enemy forces.

Generally, Herpers' outfit would be inserted for 22- to 25-day missions "looking for the enemy" in territory controlled by the North Vietnamese.

"Sometimes you couldn't tell the good guys from the bad," Herpers remembers. "They'd be in the villages during the day and then fighting us at night."

To address that problem, his unit recruited entire villages. They would pay the village members to be their Vietnamese contacts in the region, feed intelligence to the Americans and to fight alongside Herpers and his buddies.



This 1976 photo shows Master Sergeant (E-8) Rich Herpers in full dress uniform. Herpers said his time at E-8 and in command of a Special Forces unit was the "most rewarding" time he spent in the military.

"In a lot of cases they were grateful we were there," Herpers says. "We had medical personnel and would routinely use their knowledge and supplies to help the villages we were cooperating with.

"We thought we were doing the right thing," he explains. "Most of us just wanted to help the people. Would it have been better if we'd never gone? We can't answer that. No one can."

After the war

By the end of Vietnam, Herpers had so much time invested in the military that a career was only natural. He spent the rest of his enlistment mostly stateside, working nuclear security and, finally, training Special Operations soldiers.

Herpers retired in 1983 as a Sergeant Major (E-9), the highest enlisted rank. He kicked around some after he retired: He worked with the Veterans of Foreign Wars and moved to Israel for a few years. He ended up in California where he started with Metro in 1990.

Eighteen years later he finds himself in El Monte at the San Gabriel Valley Division, trying to impart some of the lessons he learned in a lifetime of military service to his employees.

"We're supposed to teach people all that you know, not hold onto that knowledge," he says.

Herpers boils down his service in a single word: camaraderie.

"Sure, I was proud of my service," he says. "But the people I met were the difference. The closeness you feel with people who you served with isn't something you can duplicate."

Teamwork and friendship are central to his perspective on life. Nearly every story he tells begins with, "My friend and I were..." or, "We went to..."

Days like Independence Day remind Herpers of his service and the friends he served with – those he still knows and those he lost.

"I think about it all the time," Herpers says. "But it doesn't take a special day to remind me of what happened, what I participated in.

"I feel lucky. Most of us who made it back feel lucky. We're not happy [about Vietnam]...most of us lost good friends and that feels bad," he explains. "But the friendships I made while I was in [the military] I wouldn't trade for anything."