

# A RETURN TO VIETNAM

## Former Marine interpreter takes emotional journey

By KATHY ANEY  
East Oregonian

In his mind, Skip Nichols often returned to Vietnam.

Sometimes memories sidled into his consciousness. Other times they reached out, grabbed him and plunged him back into the thick of the war. He tried banishing them to the basement of his psyche. When that didn't work, he worked with a counselor to bring the memories out into the open as a way to diminish their power. But nothing, it seemed, could totally silence the voices of Vietnam.

So, he decided to go back.

Nichols and his wife Paula took a battlefield tour called Return to Vietnam. The Walla Walla, Washington, couple flew to Hanoi in March and joined a group of Vietnam veterans who were intent on returning to the country that had affected them so much. The 12 veterans determined the itinerary for the two-week tour. Each chose a few locations where they had experienced something profound and often disturbing. Also along on the trip was the daughter of a soldier who had died in Vietnam.

Almost five decades had rushed by since Nichols had last set foot on Vietnam soil. In the interim, he met Paula on a blind date in Texas, fell in love, married and raised two daughters. He carved out a successful career in journalism, retiring in 2013 as managing editor of the East Oregonian. Through the years, the impact of his Vietnam experience simmered behind his easygoing disposition.

### The buddy plan

Nichols' Vietnam journey started at 18 when he and a friend joined the military on the buddy plan after a Marine recruiter dropped into high school study hall to chat. After graduation in 1967, Nichols attended boot camp, went to radio school and learned Vietnamese. Soon he was landing at an airfield in Da Nang. He received his orders, a flak jacket, helmet, weapons and ammunition. He took another flight and a long ride in a cargo truck to an artillery base called Camp Carroll, which was south of the Demilitarized Zone and home to the 3rd Marine Regiment. Arriving at Camp Carroll is still vivid in his memory.

"We threw our sea bags off the truck to the ground," he said. "They sank into the mud."

As a radio man, he and other Marines patrolled dangerous ground. He got used to frequent ambushes.

"It was a pretty hot area," Nichols said. "That was home for five months."

Other memories are tougher for Nichols.

One day at the Quang Tri base in central Vietnam, Nichols remembers standing in line for the showers after coming back from patrol. He stepped into an outdoor shower stall, his flak jacket, helmet and weapon close by. The shower came to an abrupt halt as the base came under attack.

"Rockets and mortars started coming in," Nichols recalled. "The alarm sounded over speakers. I remember running to the perimeter and thinking, 'I don't want to die naked.'"

As he and another Marine ran side-by-side, a rocket exploded "10 meters behind us." Nichols, knocked out for a short while, awoke to see the other man dead only yards away. Later, after med-



E.J. Harris/East Oregonian

Former Marine interpreter Skip Nichols holds a piece of shrapnel from a North Vietnamese rocket that killed a fellow Marine right next to him during the Tet Offensive in the Vietnam War.



Skip Nichols/Submitted Photo

A fishing boat on the beach at Cua Viet on the South China Sea.

ics had taken the soldier away, Nichols noticed a jagged and bloody piece of shrapnel embedded nearby. He removed the chunk of metal and still has it, a poignant reminder of the brutality of war and the randomness of who died and who didn't.

### A boy on a water buffalo

Other memories haunt Nichols, too. He remembers a boy riding a water buffalo toward the perimeter of Camp Carroll. Though warned to turn around, the boy kept on coming. An officer ordered Nichols and other Marines that if the rider came any farther, they were to shoot him. He crossed the perimeter and, in seconds, the boy and the water buffalo lay dead.

"Later, we learned he was retarded," Nichols said. "He loved the chocolates the Americans gave out. That's why he had come."

The experiences kept coming. More often than not, Nichols admitted he "was pretty damn

scared" in Vietnam.

This is tough stuff. Every veteran has their own searing memories. On the tour bus, the veterans told their stories over a microphone to the others, usually just before arriving at a destination significant to the speaker. Many of the stops brought strong emotion.

The group hiked with one of their members to the spot where her father had died. She carried photos, flowers, medals, a letter he had written to her shortly before his death and a poem she had penned in his honor. She read the letter and the poem. The veterans saluted as "Taps" wafted from a recorder.

They accompanied a fellow veteran to a village where he had spent time. He met a woman who he gave medicine to when she was a 15-year-old girl. She rode up on a motorcycle, and both of their faces lit up with recognition. She invited the American veteran to her home.

### An abrupt ending

In 1968, Nichols' time in Vietnam ended so abruptly that he'd never said a proper goodbye. The young Marine was called home to Texas when it appeared his mother was dying from an aneurysm. When his mom recovered, he got ready to return to the war. Waiting for his flight, however, he got word his father had suffered a stroke. Nichols never made it back to Vietnam. Later, he learned many of the men in his unit had died in an artillery attack.

"Honestly, I have always felt guilty," Nichols said. "It still eats at me. Maybe I could have made a difference."

Probably not, though, he admitted. He likely would have come home in a coffin just as they had.

Nichols' wife, Paula, experienced her own awakening during the Vietnam tour. At first, Skip hadn't wanted her to come along to a place that had caused him so much pain. But she insisted. She didn't want him to face it alone. Plus her husband didn't like to talk about Vietnam and she needed to know more.

"It made me more understanding," Paula said. "I found out more in two weeks than in 46 years of marriage."

Nichols is glad she insisted on coming. "It made an important connection for us," he said.

Together, they visited such places as the Highway of Horror, the Tu Duc Tombs, Hamburger Hill and the Vinh Moc Tunnels, a complex of passageways dug by locals to evade U.S. bombing. They took a dragon boat cruise and walked on China Beach.

Nichols said he loves the country and the people, despite Vietnam being the site of so much violence. During the trip, he felt amazed by the people's warmth.

"They didn't seem to hold any animosity," Nichols said. "They were warm and welcoming."

"Everyone wanted to talk," Paula said. "We'd draw a crowd. They wanted to practice their English."

### Impossible to really go back

Nichols said even though he returned to Vietnam, he realizes now that it wasn't possible to really go back. The Vietnam he knew doesn't really exist anymore. Take Da Nang, for example.

"I didn't even recognize it," Nichols said. "I had thought of it as my 18-year-old self, but it has changed."

Nichols remembered two-story buildings, shacks and Quonset huts near the airport. He and Paula found skyscrapers, golf courses, luxury hotels, private villas, resorts and even a Dragon Bridge that breathes fireworks and spouts water.

But, standing back on that red Vietnamese soil, he felt some of his demons loosening their grip. Visiting his own list of significant places and those of others brought some of Nichols' murky memories into focus. After seeing Camp Carroll, Quang Tri and other spots and talking to fellow veterans, he can now fill in some of the gaps.

"Before, I would try and put the pieces together into a giant puzzle where I didn't even know what the picture was," Nichols said. "This trip allowed me to add my pieces to others'."



**9-1-WHAT?**  
THE BEST OF THE WORST CALLS TO ASTORIA 911 DISPATCH

## Haters

We get cranky with the neighbors as much as anyone. But the Seaside caller who suffered through the music and the singing but alerted the cops about offensive lyrics? Please. The answer to bad lyrics is always more bad lyrics ...

Follow reporter Kyle Spurr on his 9-1-What? Twitter watch, where a few of the sometimes head-scratching calls to area dispatch take center stage. The full feed is at [www.twitter.com/9\\_1\\_WHAT](http://www.twitter.com/9_1_WHAT).

9-1-WHAT? Following

{5/22 @ 10 p.m.} Neighbor staring into caller's window from his trailer. The only place he gets internet service is by the window. #Knappa

1 2

9-1-WHAT? Following

{5/23 @ 1:55 p.m.} A man and woman with a blowtorch smoking something in a glass pipe. #Astoria

2

9-1-WHAT? Following

{5/23 @ 7:14 p.m.} Report of someone harassing sea lions. #Astoria

2

9-1-WHAT? Following

{5/29 @ 4:50 p.m.} Caller reported neighbors playing music and singing. Caller was offended by the lyrics. #Seaside

8:01 AM - 31 May 2016

9-1-WHAT? Following

{5/27 @ 4:37 a.m.} Report of a deer on the #Astoria Bridge.

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