



Mike Morehead and Jack Clay served as Navy radio operators on Tango boats, which patrolled Vietnam's waterways and canals and carried Army troops. Contributed photo

# Two Vietnam veterans reunite after 47 years

## Online photos rekindle battle-forged friendship

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Mike Morehead and Jack Clay bonded while patrolling the murky canals and rivers of southern Vietnam.

The two Navy radiomen got separated in 1969 and returned home from the war — Morehead to Pilot Rock and Clay to Springfield — never knowing if the other had survived. Instead of trying to reconnect, they concentrated on building families and careers, letting their war memories fade.

Forty-seven years after last seeing each other, Clay spotted photos posted by Morehead's wife Barbara on the internet. One showed a Tango boat and another a young sailor in camouflage holding a M14 sniper rifle. The sailor looked familiar. Clay had forgotten Morehead's name by then, but he recalled the bond they had forged while carrying out night ambushes on canals near the Cambodian border.

After digging into a dusty box of photos, Clay discovered another image that looked to be the man in the photo and him together. Clay instant messaged the photo to Morehead's wife Barbara with the question, "Is this Mike?"

It was. The men reconnected by phone and Facebook. On July 10, Morehead knocked on Clay's front door in Ocean Shores, Washington. The veterans stared each other for a long moment, struggling to detect a glimpse of the young soldier the other had once been.

"I hadn't seen him since September of 1969," Morehead said of the 67-year-old Clay. "He'd aged. After about five minutes, I could see Jack Clay."

Clay experienced a similar shift. His buddy's thick brown mane was mostly gone, but the man's dry wit



Mike Morehead and Jack Clay reunited 47 years after serving together in the "Brown Water Navy" in Vietnam. Contributed photo

and easygoing approach to life were still in high gear.

The men took long drives and talked about their lives. Clay had retired after years in research and development with Boeing in Seattle. Morehead recently finished a second career at the Umatilla Chemical Depot where he regularly wore an inflated protective suit and three pairs of gloves to inspect containment rooms and the robots that destroyed the deadly chemicals.

They spoke about hobbies, such as Clay's passion for digging razor clams and Morehead's love of hunting.

Eventually, they talked about Vietnam.

"We went to the man cave at night and sat and talked," Morehead said. "We reconnected. It brought back all the tapes that had been filed away."

Upon arriving in Vietnam, the Oregon boys hit it off immediately. They were assigned to different Tango boats that operated in the same unit.

As radio operators, they manned the radio, but also served as navigator and "holder of the morphine," said Clay.

The Tango boats, joint Navy/Army vessels, got ambushed often by Viet Cong fighters concealed in the jungle. Each Tango had a layer of rebar and Styrofoam beneath to serve as armor against rocket-propelled grenades. The RPGs generally hit the rebar and exploded on contact. The two-foot-deep wall of Styrofoam repelled the shrapnel. The Viet Cong almost always shot first.

"The Viet Cong would sneak up to the boats and fire on us," Clay said.

"When we got ambushed, we'd return fire in the general direction," said Morehead.

American response sometimes included long streams of fire powered by jellied gasoline, or napalm, from flamethrowers. Occasionally flaming insurgents would run from the jungle and jump into the river. When they popped up to breathe, they reignited. The stuff of nightmares.

In Clay's man cave, their memories included the good, bad and the ugly. They remembered the nighttime stakeouts along the rivers and using early night vision devices called starlight scopes to detect

enemy combatants — the light from a single firefly could disable the scopes for several minutes. They remembered the poisonous snakes that dropped from trees and the rat-sized spiders they killed with two-by-fours.

They talked about Operation Giant Slingshot, an effort to stop the Viet Cong from resupplying weapons. They remembered stopping small flat-bottomed wooden boats called sampans and searching them — even reaching into crocks of fish soup and running ropes under each boat to dislodge weapons.

They remembered chaos of the war and coming to terms with the idea of killing other human beings.

"It was everyone for himself when the shooting started," Morehead said. "After the first time, there is no doubt in your mind, it's either you or them or you don't go home."

Clay said he got through the experience by focusing on one moment at a time.

"Back then, you lived every day as if it could be your last," he said. "You looked at the sunset and you didn't know how many more sunsets you'd see. If you really worried about it, you'd go crazy. So it was in God's hands. If you made it, you made it. If you didn't, you didn't."

Both made it home, though the homecoming was a shock, especially for Clay.

"Coming home, we weren't respected. We weren't welcomed," he said. "Most of us buried our experiences away, raised our families and started our careers."

Morehead did much the same though he said his rural homecoming was kinder and gentler.

At that time, neither knew what had happened to the other and maybe didn't want to know. They returned home with scars but no lasting injuries and both marvel that they made it.

Now that they have reconnected, they don't plan to lose each other again.

"I liked Jack then and I still like him," Morehead said. "We'll be friends for the rest of our lives."

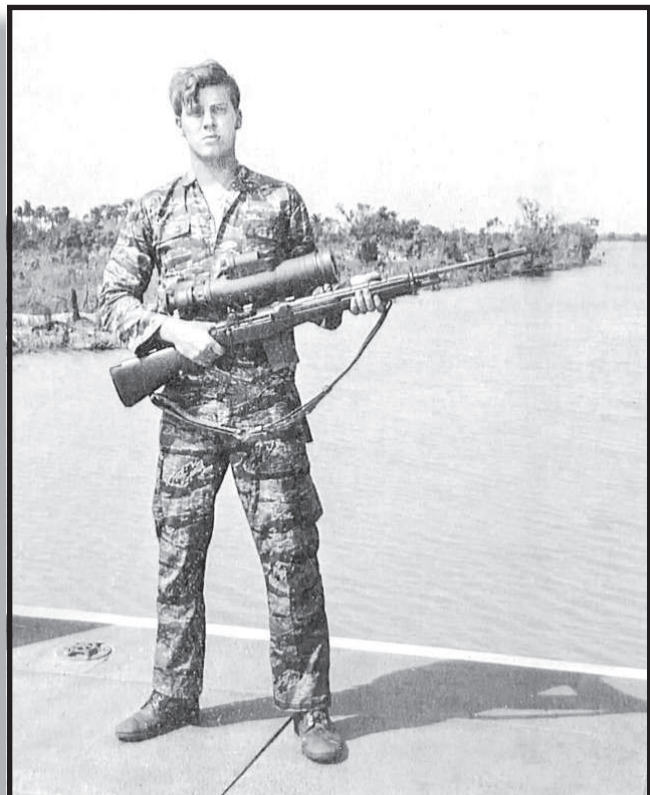
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Jack Clay on a Tango boat during the Vietnam War. Contributed photo

"I liked Jack then and I still like him. We'll be friends for the rest of our lives."

— Mike Morehead, Vietnam veteran



Mike Morehead poses with his M14 sniper rifle while serving in Vietnam in the late 1960s. Contributed photo