

grandfather's footsteps'



Tribal Elder Steve Bobb Sr. is a Vietnam-era Marine Corps veteran who enlisted in 1968.



Tribal Elder and Marine Corps Vietnam veteran Steve Bobb Sr., left, and fellow Marine Rob Martin, from Churchtown, Pa., were paired up in combat situations to watch out for one another while serving in Vietnam. "Rob was my other half," Bobb said.

nam. After landing in the country in January 1970, Bobb immediately noticed two things: The aroma and heat.

"There is an odor that hangs over the country, almost like a garbage dump," he says.

He was 20 years old.

Bobb, who was trained to work with munitions, was instead assigned to the infantry, which meant being directly in the battlefields, or in the case of Vietnam, swamps.

"You don't get a cushy job when you arrive, you have to be in the crap," he says.

Due to the danger, soldiers stayed mostly on secure bases when they weren't on duty, which often meant heavy drinking to ease thoughts of what was going on around them and to pass the time.

"I woke up in the sand with mosquito bites all over me, passed out, more than once," Bobb says. "It wasn't good."

Despite having automatic weapons fired at his head, getting lost on night patrol in the jungle and seeing death happening all around him, Bobb left Vietnam physically unscathed.

"Either I am extremely lucky or I was being saved for a higher purpose," he says. "That is when you start believing in guardian angels."

What Bobb saw and heard continues to affect him even 48 years later and he has never had guns in his home.

"I don't even want to hear the sound," he says. "I tried to get myself as far away from guns and killing as I could. When you have seen gruesome things like that, it leaves a permanent image in your mind."

Before leaving the country, he stopped off at nearby Da Nang Air

Base to visit Leno.

"We visited for just a few minutes, but it was great to see him there, like being at home," Bobb says.

Leno agrees.

"Serving in Vietnam, when you have those connections, it is for life," Leno says. "It was great to see him and know he was going home."

In addition to their Tribal and military service connections, Leno's wife, Liz, and Bobb's wife, Connie, also are lifelong friends.

"Our kids grew up together," Leno says. "We never stopped being friends."

An artist for life

After a short stint as a welder upon his return from Vietnam, Bobb began pursuing his passion for art on a professional level. In 1972, he opened Bobb Art & Design, which specializes in custom auto painting. Much of his early influences come from Allen George, the father of current Tribal Council Secretary Jon A. George.

He also spent several years working as a truck and sign painter.

"I just do it for fun now," Bobb says. "I do a lot of work for schools, charity work and auction items."

His most recent work is the logo for the 25th annual McMinnville Wine and Food Classic, which was held recently at the Evergreen Space Museum. He also recently re-painted the Bulldog logo in the gym at Willamina High School.

Bobb draws freehand instead of using a computer, so all revisions are done from scratch.

"I believe if you have a gift, you

are obligated to share it in some way," he says.

In the 1990s, he began sculpting and took his first professional class to delve into that medium. When a Tribal committee began fundraising for the West Valley Veterans Memorial, Bobb was asked by Leno, who was then on Tribal Council, to be the artist. Bobb also was part of the ad hoc committee that secured the \$360,000 needed to build the memorial and did the Trail of Tears walk from outside Medford to Grand Ronde to help raise money in 2002.

The final Veterans Memorial design features a man and woman dressed in traditional Native attire reaching toward the sky surrounded by four black pillars representing the four branches of the armed forces – Marines, Army, Navy and Air Force.

Tribal members Courtney Galigher and Mark LaBonte posed in traditional regalia for the statue, which honors both male and female veterans.

"I designed it so that viewers would be looking up," he says. "I saw one Native American memorial that was in the ground. I didn't like that. When you are honoring someone, you should look up."

The bronze sculpture was dedicated in May 2003. The original,

smaller version of the sculpture is located in the foyer of Bobb's house.

Connie says that although her husband may not always show it, he cares deeply about people.

"He has a real passion to help veterans and, as he has gotten older, he has become a lot more caring about people," she says.

'I have been very lucky'

Bobb says there was a time when the years seemed to drag on, but now that he is older, they are flying by.

When he reflects on his life, he says he feels very fortunate.

"I always think about how lucky I have been to do what I love for a living despite dealing with all of the health issues I have had," Bobb says.

Over the years, Bobb has battled rheumatoid arthritis and now is blind in his left eye. His immune system stopped functioning for a time in the 1990s. He was diagnosed with leukemia in 2010 and has been in remission since 2013.

"I mean, how many times can you be so lucky?" Bobb says. "In my older age now, I have found out that it is not about what you acquire or may not acquire. As long as you have the love of family and friends, you shouldn't sweat the other stuff." ■