

One family's sacrifices

By Brady Delander | Staff Writer | May 09, 2009 06:13



Jim and Charlene Branaugh take a moment to reflect on the military service of their family. Branaugh joined the Coast Guard in the early part of the Vietnam War, and his two brothers enlisted in the Army not long after. Branaugh's brother Larry was killed in action, and the youngest brother Don was incapacitated by stress-related issues that put him in a hospital for the remainder of his life. Photo by Jon Brodhacker

Busy prowling the waters off Alaska for Russian and North Korean ships in the mid-1960s, Jim Branaugh was forced to set a loose date for his wedding.

As a radarman for the Coast Guard during the Vietnam War, Branaugh couldn't just pick up and head back to Colorado on his own timeframe. Instead, he told his then-fiancée to plan the big day for one of two weekends, hoping he'd make it back for one of them.

Branaugh did make it, and he and Charlene (Jones) were married on July 29, 1967 - a Saturday. The following Tuesday, mere days after reuniting with his new bride, Branaugh was shipped back to chilly northern waters to resume service.

So much for a honeymoon.

"The joke is that he went on a cruise after the wedding without me," Charlene Branaugh said.

Two grown children, four grandchildren and 41 years of marriage later, the Branaughs can look back now and laugh at that hectic time.

There are other memories, however, that are more difficult to talk about.

Honoring country

Jim Branaugh relocated from Minneapolis to Colorado in 1952, eventually landing in Thornton in 1954. Along with his sister and two brothers, Branaugh matriculated through

Thornton Elementary School and then Merritt Hutton Junior-Senior High School, the only high school in Adams 12 Five Star Schools at the time.

Two years after graduating in 1963, as the first U.S. combat troops were being deployed to Vietnam, Branaugh opted to enlist in the Coast Guard.

"I knew I was going to be drafted, and I didn't want that," Branaugh said. "I liked the Coast Guard's mission - search and rescue, saving people - so I decided to enlist."

He saw the ocean for the first time during boot camp in California, and the ensuing years would send Branaugh to both of America's coasts as well as the Bering Sea. It was there, aboard the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Dexter, that Branaugh and his unit patrolled the territorial waters for encroaching ships and performing many search and rescue missions.

As U.S. involvement in Vietnam began to peak, Branaugh's two brothers - Larry and Don - enlisted in the Army. After their decisions, life for the Branaugh family would never be the same.

A dangerous time

Don Branaugh, the youngest brother, was serving in Germany when his life was devastated by still-unexplained mental failure. He was returned to the United States and hospitalized at Fitzsimmons Army Medical Center in Denver. It was determined that Don was 70 percent disabled.

Don would remain under the watch of medical staff for the ensuing 29 years before dying in July 1996.

"We never figured out what caused Don's problem. We never got any answers," Jim said.

It was a difficult situation to cope with, but things would only get worse for the family following Don's hospitalization.

Larry Branaugh, the eldest brother, had flown numerous missions over Vietnam as a pilot of a Huey Helicopter. During one of those dangerous missions - on April 19, 1968 - Larry's chopper was shot down over the A Shau Valley.

He died the following day, at the age of 24.

Six weeks later, Jim was given an early release from service by way of Congressional action.

"It was pretty devastating for both of my dad's parents (Walt and Alice) and his siblings," said Preston Branaugh, the couple's older son. "It's a time that we didn't really discuss, but he's become more open about it in recent years."

The Branaughs' younger son, Matt, lives in Wheaton, Ill., with his family.

Only recently have details of Larry's final mission come to light. The Branaughs learned that, after the Huey chopper was shot down, Larry removed his protective gear in an effort to get his fellow soldiers out of the aircraft when he was struck by enemy fire.

"Larry was definitely a hero," Charlene said. "He's always been a hero for our family, but to actually hear the stories about what happened make it even more so."

Finding a voice

After being discharged from his service with the Coast Guard, Jim and Charlene settled in Arvada, where they continue to live.

Jim said he would have continued his military service had events been different. But in an effort to continue with his life and to support his growing family, Jim started a career in procurement with Western Electric and then Denver Wastewater Treatment and Disposal. He now works for Tri-State Generation and Transmission in Westminster.

The Branaughs are active members at Arvada Covenant Church and members of Arvada Sister Cities International. Jim also is involved with the National Association of Purchasing Management in Denver, where he serves as president-elect. He begins his term as president for the supply management organization in 2010.

Jim is also the vice-chairman of the Thornton Veterans Memorial Foundation.

"I have a passion for that project because of my brothers, and really for all veterans," Jim said.

Through his work with the foundation, Jim worked with the city of Thornton and others to help bring the traveling replica of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial to the north metro area.

The memorial was put on display during the Fourth of July holiday last year, which allowed Jim a chance to make new connections with other vets. It also provided him a chance for some closure.

"It was helpful to hear of the friendships Larry had in the service, that he was well liked and someone who could be counted on," Charlene said. "Over the last nine years it has been a blessing for our family to make friendships with those who flew with Larry."

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