

# Navy veteran enjoys return to his former battlefields

By SKIP VAUGHN

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Charlie Burke laughs when he recalls that he joined the Navy in 1966 to keep from getting drafted and going to Vietnam.

Ironically he became a hospital corpsman, a combat medic, assigned to a Marine unit in Vietnam from 1967-68. The Anderson, Indiana, native received a Purple Heart after he was wounded in action.

Burke graduated from Madison Heights High School in Anderson in May 1966 and he entered boot camp that June.

"I joined the Navy to stay out of Vietnam but it didn't work out too well," the Washington, Michigan, resident said laughing. He was the second oldest of four boys; and their father had served in the Navy in World War II.

He was 18 when assigned to Vietnam to support Hotel Company, 2nd Battalion, 9th Marine Regiment, 3rd Marine Division. He was with the company's 2nd platoon. Whenever a squad would go out on patrol or an ambush, they would take a hospital corpsman with them.

Burke earned 11 combat stars during the nine months which means he participated in 11 combat missions.

"It was terrible," he said of the experience. "It was long periods of boredom interlaced with sheer terror."

On Nov. 30, 1967, Burke's unit was on patrol in the Demilitarized Zone when they were ambushed by the North Vietnamese. Burke was wounded while running toward an injured Marine. He received shrapnel wounds to his left eye. He fully recovered but still carries a piece of shrapnel in his eye.

Fifty-one years later, the Veterans of Foreign Wars selected him to be among nine veterans who would return to Vietnam for a two-week trip to visit the places where they had fought during the war. The Ralph Charles Kahle Jr. endowment fund was established in 1999 by a \$1.1 million bequest from a Navy officer. Since 2005 the fund has enabled more than 150 wounded Vietnam veterans to return to their former battlefields. Burke traveled with his fellow veterans in April-May 2019.

"I was a little apprehensive but once I got there it was a wonderful trip," he said. "The people in Hanoi could not have been more gracious to us returning veterans. And we had a Vietnamese tour guide with us the entire two weeks.

"It was really good to go back and see how the country has changed. And Vietnam has a thriving economy."

Among their stops in the two-week tour were the places where Burke had served: Dong Ha, Camp Carol, Con Thien, and Cam Lo. In Hanoi they visited what used to be the "Hanoi Hilton" which housed American prisoners of war. They visited Hanoi, Hue, Danang, and Ho Chi Minh City, the former Saigon.

Burke said his most vivid memory from 1967-68 in Vietnam was "how beautiful the country is, just beautiful country."

He left the Navy in 1969 as a petty officer third class. He was a production worker for General Motors for 17 years until he retired in 1986. Burke received a bachelor's in finance in 1982 and a master's in international business in 1988 from Ball State University. He rejoined the Navy in 1982 and received his commission that July from officer candidate school. He was assigned to the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower, a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, as the navigation officer in 1983-84 in Norfolk, Virginia. He was with the USS Kidd guided missile destroyer from 1984-85 in Norfolk. He was assigned to the Marine Corps as a naval gunfire liaison officer from 1985-86 at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, when he left active duty. Burke retired from the Navy Reserve in 2005 as the mobilization officer at Joint Forces Command in Norfolk and left as a commander.

He was a government civilian 27 years until he retired in 2006 from the Defense Finance and Accounting Service in Indianapolis, Indiana, as an accountant.

His wife of 26 years, Tammy, retired from DFAS in 2014 after 35 years of service. She worked at Redstone in 1992-93 as chief of the family support division. The couple got married in 1993 and transferred to Indianapolis. They moved to Huntsville in 2013 and then moved to Michigan last year.

Burke, 71, is a private pilot and a member of the Single Action Shooters Society. He is a life member of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the Military Order of the Purple Heart, and the Disabled American Veterans.

He shared his thoughts on this nation's commemoration of 50 years since the Vietnam War.

"I think it's about time," he said. "I mean there's a lot of young men and women who sacrificed a lot by supporting the government in going to Vietnam when it was very unpopular to do so. And it should not have taken 50 years to recognize that sacrifice."

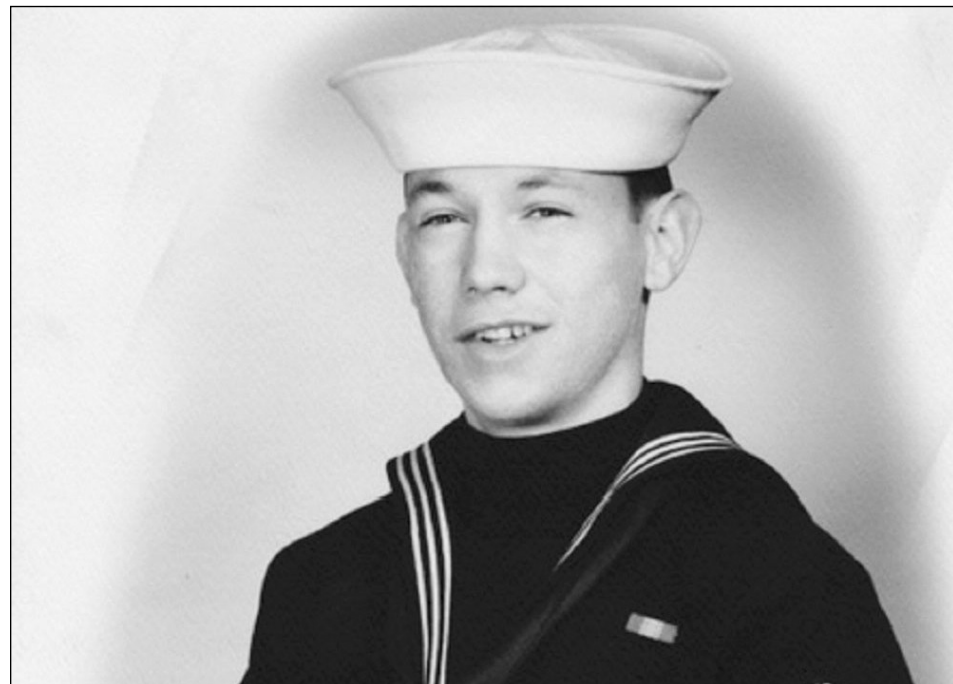
*Editor's note: This is the 264th in a series of articles about Vietnam veterans as the United States commemorates the 50th anniversary of the Vietnam War.*



Courtesy photo

**Tammy and Charlie Burke moved from Huntsville to Washington, Mich., last year. Charlie, a Navy veteran, had a two-week visit to Vietnam in April-May 2019.**

## Vietnam revisited Part 264 in series



Courtesy photo

**In December 1966, Charlie Burke graduated from the Navy Hospital Corps School as a hospital corpsman apprentice. He served in Vietnam in 1967-68.**