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Out of the jungle

Secaucus honors 14 veterans, including a surprise for the mayor

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11/16/2007

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Never-ending torrential rain. Blood-thirsty leeches. Red ants zigzagging along bare skin encased under drenched fatigues. And the constant threat of an enemy attack.

In the summer of 1966, for 27 days, the Army's 173rd Airborne served alongside a U.S. Marine brigade as they conducted a search-and-destroy mission in the thick jungles of Vietnam.

Among the young men whose boots were on the ground was none other than Secaucus Mayor Dennis Elwell. This mission, known as Operation Toledo, successfully forced the North Vietnamese army and the Viet Cong to retreat and abandon a cache of munitions and food rations.

"One of the toughest guys in the battalion, and one of the most respected, was Dennis Elwell," remembered fellow airman Chuck Huller last Sunday, in a surprise dedication to the mayor during the town's Veterans Day services. "Dennis made sergeant in less than two years. That was unheard of. He then became a squad leader." Elwell received two military honors on Sunday, the Navy Presidential Unit Citation and the Army Meritorious Unit Citation. The honors left Elwell speechless, with emotion welling up in his throat.



SUFFERING DURING AND AFTER
– Fourteen war veterans, one female volunteer, and five Eagle Scouts were honored at Sunday's Veterans Day ceremony.

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Other veterans and volunteers were honored Sunday as well.

Thirteen men were acknowledged for their service, nine from World War II and four from the Korean War. The WWII vets honored included: Arthur Engel, Charles Firtion, Joseph Lynch, Robert Lynch, Pat Presa, George Raskulinec, Edward Wolf, James Salzano and Peter van Miert.

The Korean vets were Joseph Baccola, Christopher Carnavari, Angelo Marra,

and Louis Porcelli. Five Eagle Scouts - Alex Whitlock, Christopher Pesci, Harry Allen, Eric Killroy and Christopher Bennett - were presented with Good Citizenship Citations.

The lone woman recognized at Sunday's ceremony, Lisa Totaro, actually is not a veteran, but has single-handedly spearheaded a drive to collect and send much-needed supplies to men and women serving in Iraq. With the help of family, friends and, eventually, the public, Totaro collected food, prepaid phone cards, and personal hygiene products and shipped them overseas to units she learned about through the Web site AnySoldier.com. What began in January as a senior seminar project at Ramapo College, where Totaro studied communications, has now taken on a life of its own.

"It's no longer a class project, since I graduated in May. But I'm still doing it voluntarily with the help of a few people," Totaro said. "Right now I'm really trying to get people to donate items for the holiday season." For her work, Totaro received a citation from the American Legion and a check for \$500.

Heroism in hazardous conditions

The Navy Presidential Unit Citation, the one of the two medals presented to Mayor Elwell, is authorized by the Secretary of the Navy and is presented to military units that exhibit extraordinary heroism in the face of an armed enemy and accomplished its mission despite extremely difficult, hazardous conditions.

The second medal the mayor received, the Army Meritorious Commendation, is awarded to military units for outstanding conduct for a continuous period of six months or longer. This citation is the unit equivalent to the Legion of Merit, which is given to individuals.

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Many of those gathered Sunday were themselves ex-servicemen who had lived through their own grueling war experiences on the battlefields of Korea and Europe.

After the ceremony, the mayor still grappled with language as he tried to put the moment in perspective. "The Vietnam and the Korean War veterans always felt that we were not appreciated," he said. "The media called us 'baby killers.' They were not popular wars, certainly less popular than World War II. So, to get this was just a shock. It's a thrilling moment."

Elwell, who was drafted to serve in Vietnam at age 20, previously received a medal for heroism, and he turned down another which he could have received because "I thought I was just doing my job."

Although billed as the day when the nation thanks the former rank and file for their sacrifices, in reality, Elwell said, Veterans Day has become the day when vets get together and thank each other, while the rest of America enjoys a vacation from work.

In an effort to get the community more involved with the holiday, a few years ago former freeholder and current Hudson County Veterans Affairs Director Barry Dugan launched an effort to formally recognize local vets. In cities and townships across the county, World War II and Korean War veterans are honored annually where they live.

Dugan's office plans to begin honoring Vietnam War veterans soon.

Vets struggle after coming home

Elwell noted that it takes eight enlisted personnel to keep every infantry soldier alive. This includes medics, food service workers, the folks who supply munitions and others. As Totaro's volunteer work indicates, it probably takes dozens more to sustain them from back home.

The mayor added that it will take the entire nation to sustain them when they return to U.S. and officially enter the ranks of war veterans.

"There are so many people in this country who were willing to give their lives, and who were fortunate enough not to die, but who [were maimed], and we have a tendency in this country to forget them," Mayor Elwell said on Sunday.

Indeed, many vets struggle to reintegrate into the community, find employment and make ends meet after they are discharged. According to the New Jersey Department of Military and Veterans Affairs, there are 712,000 ex-service men and women in the state, approximately 8,000 of whom are homeless.

"I think," Elwell stated emphatically, "Veterans Day should be the day when we pledge not to forget them."

Anyone interested in donating items to Lisa Totaro's holiday drive for servicemembers in Iraq can contact her at Lisa.Totaro@gmail.com.

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