



THE DERBY INFORMER

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FREEDOM is not free

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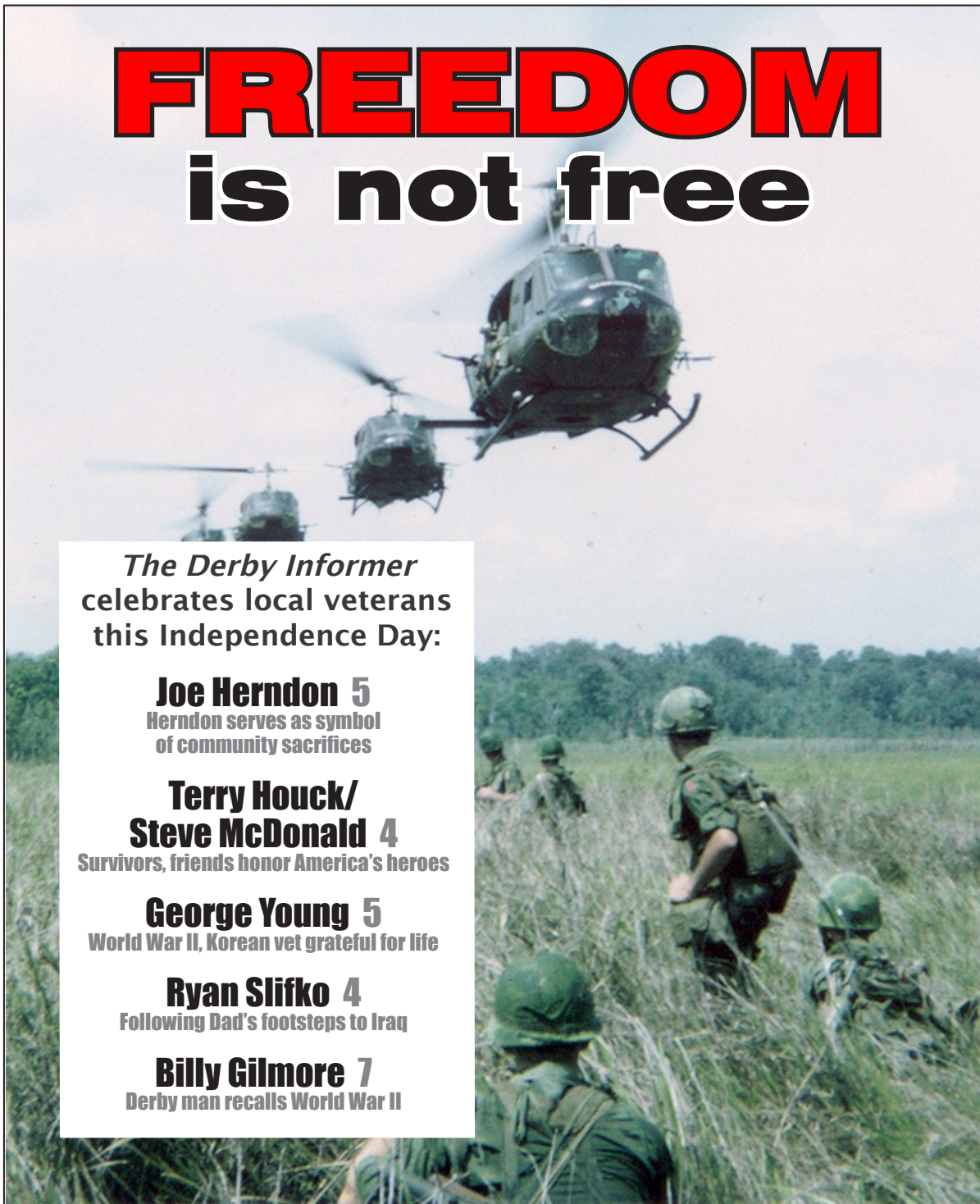
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Derby man recalls World War II



Courtesy photo

This photo was taken by rifleman Jim Todd in Vietnam in 1969 as helicopters arrived to pick up Terry Houck (pictured far right) and other members of his squadron, who were outnumbered by the enemy. Houck's friend Steve McDonald was a gunner on a similar helicopter.

Survivors, friends honor America's heroes

By Davi Stuhlsatz
Informer staff writer

Two decorated Vietnam veterans, friends since Derby High School, count themselves blessed to be alive and honoring the country's heroes as members of the American Legion Riders and Patriot Guard.

High school best friends

Terry Houck moved to Derby in ninth grade of junior high. He and Steve McDonald immediately became best friends. They got part-time jobs at the Coastal Mart on K-15 for \$1 an hour and graduated from Derby High School in May 1967.

"We were just young guys, uncertain of what would happen, and worried about being drafted," said McDonald. "You had to register at 18 for the draft. They were drafting so many

for awhile, you pretty well knew you were going to Vietnam."

Sept. 20, 1968 was a momentous day for the two best friends – draft day for McDonald and wedding day for Houck.

"When Steve got his draft notice, I figured I was right behind him," said Houck. "He called me from his final induction testing in Kansas City before he boarded the bus for basic training, and I told him, 'I'll see you soon. I'm right behind you.'"

McDonald was sent to Ft. Leonard Wood, Mo. for basic training and then Ft. Eustis, Va. for helicopter school.

Houck was drafted Nov. 14, 1968, also into the Army. Basic training was at Ft. Leonard Wood, and armored reconnaissance training was at Ft. Knox.

When his best friend called from a pay phone in California before boarding

the plane for Vietnam, Houck kept his message short so he wouldn't get too choked up: "Be good. See you in 30 days."

Vietnam

McDonald was stationed at Bien Hoa in South Vietnam as a helicopter crew chief/gunner.

He was assigned to the left side door of the helicopter, firing rounds from an M60 into the trees, spewing ammo and hot casings so that soldiers could jump the last couple of feet to the ground without too much enemy fire. The helicopter would not land when dropping troops into the field, to avoid landing on a mine.

McDonald lived in a tent and kept his M60 cleaned – the grit, sand and humidity were tough on weapons.

Houck arrived in Vietnam in April 1969. He was stationed about 25 miles away from McDonald, in Phu Loi. He was an aero rifle platoon scout. His missions were reconnaissance, search and destroy for enemy hunter/killer teams, to rescue downed helicopter and aircraft crews, and to guard downed helicopters and aircraft until they could be lifted out.

He lived in a cinder block building with a tin roof. Sandbags covered the roof and three sides of the building. The fourth side of the building faced another building, and had an entryway to a bunker shared by the two buildings. The men would hustle into the bunker and sit on wooden benches during mortar shelling.

When shelling stopped the men would head to the perimeter to defend against ground attacks.

Houck and McDonald both served with the 1st Infantry Division, known as the "Big Red One." McDonald was in the 357th Transportation Company (known as "The Bandits" and then "The Sustainers"). Houck was in Troop D (AIR) 1st Squadron 4th Cavalry and then Troop C (AIR) 16th Cavalry,

1st Aviation Brigade. Both of Houck's squadrons were known as "Darkhorse." To this day Houck wears his Vietnam call sign name, "Darkhorse 43 Alpha."

"I wear it in memory and honor of the Darkhorse troopers I served with, who were killed in action in Vietnam, wounded in combat, and served, and all men and women who served in Vietnam," he said.

Nearly 59,000 U.S. soldiers were killed in Vietnam.

Seconds and inches

"We were in combat with the enemy almost every time we went out on a mission in Vietnam," Houck said. "It wasn't about heroics or winning awards. It was about staying alive. It was about taking care of the guy next to you ... We'd fight for one another so we weren't killed. It's all about seconds and inches – where you were two seconds ago, or how many inches you were away from the bullet or fragmentation."

Risking life for a friend

In September 1969, McDonald's mother heard from Houck's family that Houck had been wounded. She notified the American Red Cross, and asked them to get a message to her son. When McDonald got the message, he was determined to visit his friend.

"It was a down time for my chopper, so I got a warrant officer to fly me there," said McDonald.

It meant a lot for his friend to check on him, said Houck, even though it was not a life threatening injury.

"Soldiers who lost a limb or organ were sent back home," said Houck. "If we could recuperate in two to three weeks, we were kept there."

Houck, who sustained injuries to his neck, back and leg in Vietnam, was moved that his friend had risked his own well-being to travel through dangerous territory to visit him. They hugged and talked.

McDonald had a bigger plan, though. He had a Huey waiting. Houck couldn't go back to the



Courtesy photo

Pictured here, Steve McDonald risked enemy fire to visit his wounded friend, Terry Houck, in Vietnam.

field until he got his stitches out, so somehow McDonald convinced Houck's first sergeant to let Houck fly back with him to Bien Hoa for a few days.

"I told him, 'This is my lifelong buddy. He's probably not going to survive the war. We went to the same high school, we're from the same hometown. Just let him spend a few days with me,'" McDonald said. "At first he said no, but somehow we kept talking and he relented and signed the papers."

Mortar shelling meant they spent two of the four nights that Houck was in Bien Hoa in bunkers, but the buddies were just happy to be together again.

Houck was supposed to be back in Phu Loi on Monday, but couldn't make it back until Tuesday. Technically, he was AWOL, but as McDonald said, "Where were they going to send him for punishment? He was already in Vietnam."

Coming home

McDonald and Houck were bombarded by bullets and grenades in the "pure hell" of Vietnam, and by slurs, rotten eggs, tomatoes and urine from anti-war protestors when they returned home.

"It was really ugly for the guys returning home," said Houck. "Protestors lined the front gate at Fort Ord, in California, where we went for debriefing and medical tests, shouting slurs and obscenities and throwing things at us."

It was minor compared to the brutality of Vietnam, where they faced death daily, but the men found it difficult nonetheless.

"We thought we were doing the right thing in defending our country," said Houck. "We couldn't understand the protestors' actions against us. We thought 'Why are they mad at us?' It made us angry, because we had been risking our lives daily for them, and they were ridiculing us and prolonging the war, by giving the enemy fuel to hang on and fight."

The men received warm welcomes home from their families in Derby and the VFW and American Legion. Still, they put their memorabilia away in boxes, and did not talk about their experiences for many years. Like so many returning Vietnam



Photo by Davi Stuhlsatz

Vietnam veterans Terry Houck and Steve McDonald honor America's fallen heroes as members of the American Legion Riders and Patriot Guard.

veterans, they disappeared into society.

"We just wanted to get on with our lives and forget about Vietnam," said Houck.

The two men went to work for Houck's father, installing and working on elevators. On weekends they camped and waterskied with their families.

"We never could stay far from the danger zone," said McDonald. "War, elevators, daredevil waterskiing ... We got back into motorcycles, too."

Honoring America's heroes

In July 2005, Houck's wife, Carol, learned that a group of protestors had disrupted an Oklahoma soldier's funeral. She and Terry created a plan for riding to funerals and showing respect to fallen heroes, their families, and their communities.

Terry discussed the plan

with McDonald and their fellow American Legion Riders from Post 136, Mulvane—who were already honoring military service personnel in a variety of ways. The group agreed to take action to preserve fallen heroes' memory and honor, and provide support to families who were being harassed by Fred Phelps and his Westboro Baptist Church protesters, and so the Patriot Guard was born.

The Patriot Guard stands guard at funerals of America's fallen heroes who are killed in action or are casualties of the current wars on terrorism in Afghanistan, Iraq, or any war zone. The group also offers this support to law enforcement and firefighters killed in the line of duty, shielding them from protestors, and showing them deep respect—a respect not granted McDonald and Houck on their return home from war.

The Patriot Guard is open to all; more information is available at www.patriotguardks.org.

"I'm not a hero," said Houck, despite awards, including the Combat Infantryman's Badge, three Purple Hearts and two Bronze Stars with valor. "All the heroes are listed on the Vietnam Wall, and laid to rest on the battlefields and in cemeteries around the world."

"We just want to honor the people serving our country and let them know we're here for them," said McDonald, who received Combat Crewchief wings, a Vietnam Campaign Medal and Air Medals.

"We've had good lives. We're still here because of all the brave men we served with. We fought for each other," said Houck.

"We're survivors," said McDonald.