

Danger haunted Marine's helicopter duty

From pilot rescues to bringing out the dead, demands were unending

EDITOR'S NOTE: In recognition of the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II, Lawrence Township Memorial Committee, in cooperation with the Ledger, will feature a column each week during the anniversary year profiling a Lawrence resident.

"We had one hour notice to be packed and ready to ship out to Vietnam," Larry Hargraves began, "even though we had been on the alert prior to that, it didn't seem like much time

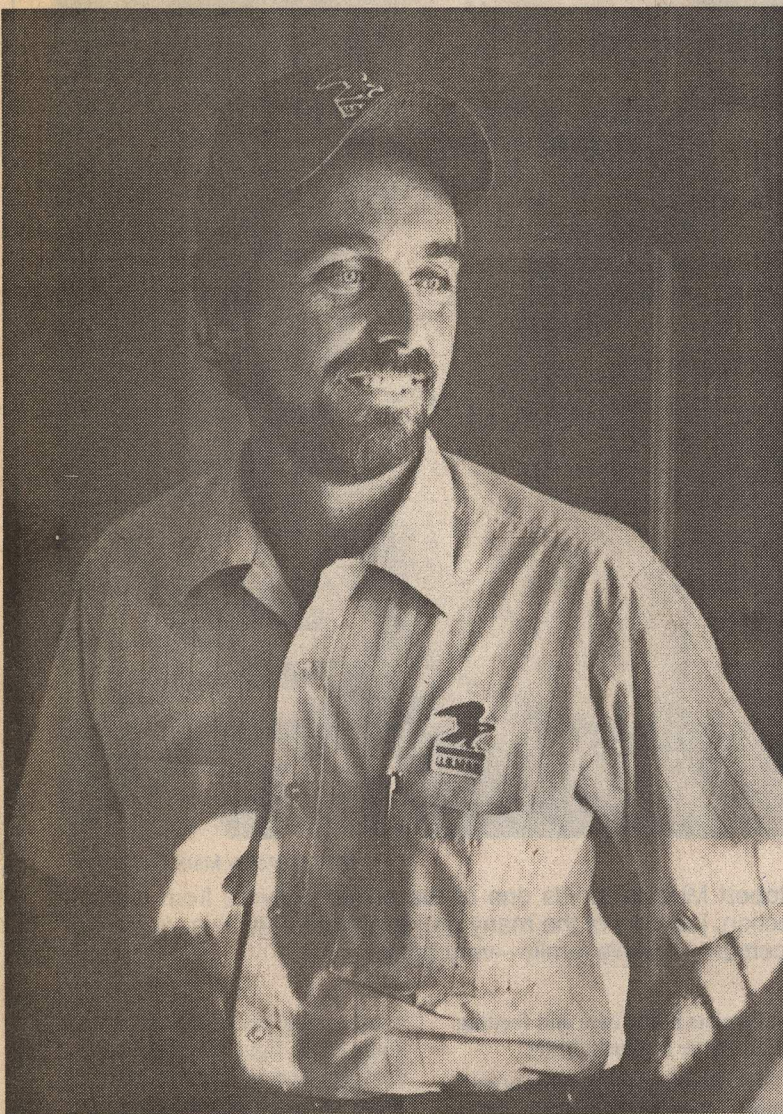
to get everything together. There were five of us, all helicopter door gunners and had trained together at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, and we knew that sooner or later we would be scheduled for a tour in 'Nam.' "

It was late in 1970, and the U.S. had been involved in one way or another in Vietnam since World War II when national leaders realized the strategic importance of our presence in Southeast Asia. There had been a gradual build-up of military observ-

ers and advisors over the next 20 years, and by the end of 1964 the Communist Vietcong were on the verge of taking over all Vietnam and the adjacent Laos and Cambodia as well, as a full-scale undeclared war was being waged. By the end of 1965, the U.S. had poured large numbers of combat troops and equipment into

VETERAN PROFILE

Nicholas Loveless



Staff photo by Mark Czajkowski

An eight-year veteran of the U.S. Postal Service at the Circle Branch, Larry Hargraves is married to the former Maryan Markowski. They have two children.

combat troops and equipment into South Vietnam, and had been authorized to take the offensive as the war escalated. Four years later little appeared to have been accomplished and President Nixon ordered the gradual withdrawal of U.S. troops, but the fighting was far from over.

Lawrence T. Hargraves was born on Sept. 6, 1952, while his family lived in Hunterdon County. Several years later, they moved to the old farmhouse on what was known as the Elias Farm off Brunswick Pike north of Franklin Corner Road. He attended School No. 4 at Bakers Basin, and Lawrence Junior and Senior high schools. In July, 1970, he enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps and was sent to Parris Island, S.C. for basic training and to Camp Lejeune, N.C. for training in the use of explosives and where he became a member of a helicopter support team. The development of helicopters altered the entire art of modern warfare, and they have become the workhorse of the military services. The war in Vietnam has even been referred to as a helicopter war, as they were used for every conceivable purpose.

"I arrived in Vietnam late in 1970, and was assigned to the 3rd Marine Division," Larry continued. "I was assigned to a helicopter crew aboard the USS Okinawa, a helicopter carrier, and for the first six months of my tour flew off the Okinawa which was in the Gulf of Tonkin most of that time. One of our main missions was to pick up downed pilots and airmen, but we also were assigned to transport troops, ammunition and supplies, evacuate sick and wounded troops, and fly the mail out to all the ships offshore in the Gulf of Tonkin and the South China Sea. The most depressing job was bringing out the body bags of the men killed in action.

"The last part of my tour we were transferred to the 9th Marines stationed at Danang. On one occasion I found a grenade with the pin pulled, wedged between our mooring chain on our chopper. If we had started the engine, the vibration would have jarred it loose and it would have detonated. The Vietcong were everywhere and blended in with other South Vietnamese and it was impossible to tell them apart. We were always on the alert for sabotage.

"I always flew with the same crew and we all depended on each other. There were two pilots and either two or three gunners. One gunner was the crew chief of the chopper, and we all had other duties as well. Our aircraft were CH-46, CH-53, and UH choppers we called 'Hueys.' They had .50 caliber machine guns mounted at the doors, and some models had tail guns. The Hueys had big sliding doors and we would hang halfway out of the door when we were flying in combat zones. The only thing between us and the ground was our safety belts that held us in. During

the monsoon season we didn't fly too much, as the landing zones were too soft to land from the heavy rains, but otherwise we were in the air almost all the time and went wherever and whenever we were needed."

As the stalemated Paris peace talks dragged on, and the U.S. continued its withdrawal from Vietnam, the fighting continued as the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese army became increasingly bold and U.S. military casualties continue to mount.

In April, 1972, the North Vietnamese army launched a major offensive and crossed the Demilitarized Zone, taking most of Quang Tri Province, threatening the cities of Quang Tri and Hue. It was on a mission to rescue downed pilots there, that Larry's chopper was hit by enemy fire and crashed, taking him out of the war, at least temporarily.

"Major Bell, our pilot, received a radio message that there were two downed pilots," Larry continued, "and we flew in to retrieve them. We had already flown reinforcement troops into Quang Tri, but there was a large concentration of the enemy in the area. The B-52s had bombed them the night before, but had been off by about a half-mile. We touched down at the coordinates given to us and tried to locate the two F-4 Phantom jet pilots. He found one but not the other, and got him aboard. He was dazed and seemed to be in shock. As we were taking off, we took a hit in our transmission by an AK-47 from the ground, covering us all with hydraulic fluid. Major Bell told us to 'hang on, we're flying this out of here until it freezes up.' We didn't get far when he told us we were going down, and we crashed hard. I was trying to help the other gunner, who was covered with blood, before I realized that I was the one that was bleeding from lacerations on my head and right hand.

"The NVA were all around us, but fortunately another chopper was close by and dropped in and took us out, all within 13 minutes from the time we crashed. They told us that in another five minutes the NVA would have had us."

Larry had many close calls during his tour in Vietnam, his chopper had been hit a number of times, and his pilot wounded on one mission. He also witnessed a close friend get hit by a rocket that exploded directly in front of him.

His crash landing in Quang Tri put him out of action for the next three weeks, with 52 stitches for a head wound and his right hand so severely cut he almost lost it. After a hospital stay and an R&R trip to Singapore, where he attended a Bob Hope road show, he volunteered to go back to duty even though he could have been rotated home. The Marine Corps apparently felt he had done his share, and in July, 1972, he was returned to the U.S. where he was assigned as an instructor at Quantico, Va., until his discharge on July 20, 1973, with the

Veteran

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rank of E-3, lance corporal. His awards include the Vietnam Campaign Medal, Vietnam Service Medal with Stripe, Combat Action Ribbon, and Air Crew Wings.

Larry returned to Lawrence and worked at U.S. Steel for a number of years before becoming a letter carrier with the U.S. Postal Service at the Circle Branch eight years ago. He is married to the former Maryan Markowski, and they have two children, Jacolyn, 6, and Jamie, 3, and reside on Whitmarsh Drive. Larry has been an avid hunter and fisherman all his life, and particularly enjoys tuna fishing. He is an active member of American Legion Post 414, serves on the executive committee, and is also a member of the Lawrence Veterans Memorial Committee.

Vietnam was America's longest war, and although we won the battles, the war was lost, and Saigon fell to the Communists on April 30, 1975. The servicemen and women that had put their lives on the line were ignored when they returned and often subjected to ridicule by those that opposed the war. Twenty years have passed, and the President's policy to restore relations with that government has found some support, but not with Larry and most veterans of the war who maintain too much American blood was shed there, and to now acknowledge the present re-

gime would make the Communist victory complete. Only time will tell whether or not the proper decisions have been made.

The Veterans Memorial Committee is asking veterans from World War II and other conflicts to provide a photograph in uniform, along with their name, present address, branch of service and unit, where and when they served, their principal assignment and summary of their service. Their individual experiences or unusual stories are also welcomed. All photographs will be returned. Families of deceased veterans are also encouraged to submit articles. All materials should be sent to The Lawrence Township Veterans Memorial Committee, P.O. Box 55966, Trenton, N.J. 08638. Inquiries may be made by calling 882-9108.

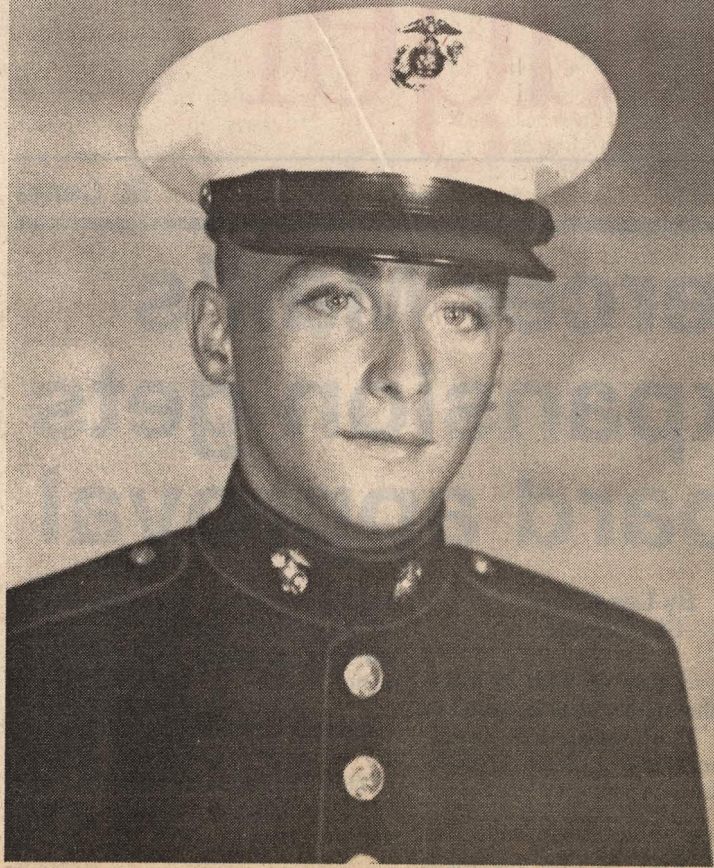


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Larry Hargraves in Marine uniform in 1970, the year he began duty as a helicopter gunner in Vietnam.