

A Vietnam vet, Bob Simonelli now heads Post 414

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

VETERAN PROFILE

Nicholas Loveless

Vietnam was another world away when Bob Simonelli was born on Sept. 4, 1947. The country had survived five years of Japanese occupation and two years of internal strife, with Ho Chi Minh emerging as president of the new republic in the French Union. Nineteen years later, Bob was serving as a combat infantryman on a 12-month tour of duty with the U.S. Fourth Infantry Division in "Nam."

Robert H. Simonelli was born in Lawrence Township, attended Lawrence public schools and graduated from Trenton High School in 1965. He has always been active in sports, and as soon as he was eligible, entered the American Legion baseball program with his brother, Peter. As a second baseman, he played three consecutive years with Post 414 under manager Joseph Domanski. Playing Legion baseball was one of the factors that would later involve Bob in various other activities. His father, Peter, an Army veteran of World War II enrolled Bob as a member of the Sons of the Legion (SAL) at an early age.

On Oct. 16, 1966, Bob was inducted into the U.S. Army, receiving his basic training at Ft. Dix. He was then sent to Ft. Jackson, S.C., for advanced infantry train-

ing. On completion of that training, he was sent to Vietnam for a one-year tour of duty. Arriving in "Nam" in March, 1967, he was assigned to the Fourth Infantry Division at Pleiku. The Fourth was known as the "Ivy" Division for the four leaves of ivy in the division insignia. The Fourth had been one of the first divisions to land on Utah Beach in Normandy on D-Day, June 6, 1944, and had fought their way across Europe.

Bob learned very quickly that Vietnam was engaged in a shooting war. His base camp at Pleiku had been the target of a bloody Viet Cong attack two years before his arrival there.

The United States had never engaged in a war similar to Vietnam. In 1954 the country had been divided and a six-mile line of demarcation established at approximately the 17th parallel. North Vietnam was Communist, and South Vietnam was non-Communist, similar to Korea. As the Communists in the North became more determined to take over the South, the U.S. Marines were gradually landed early in 1965, followed by Army combat troops, as President Johnson declared all of Vietnam a combat zone. By early 1968, U.S. military personnel in South Vietnam rose to over a half a million.

Bob recalls that his duty assignments in "Nam" included rifleman, grenade launcher and tunnel rat. "There were no front lines in 'Nam' and it was hard to tell exactly who the enemy were, as they were all around us, and all South Vietnam was the battlefield. The North Vietnamese Army would infiltrate into the South, and the Viet Cong, who were the Communists in the South, were fighting a guerrilla war. The VC infiltrated towns and cities all through the South and would launch sneak attacks on our installations without warning."

"We didn't spend much time at Pleiku," Bob continues. "Our main mission was to go out on search and destroy patrols. We would be off on patrols most of the time in the jungle. We ate and slept right out in the open and once in a while go back to Pleiku to get cleaned up and get a few good meals. The worst time was during the monsoon season and we would be wet most of the time. After I had been there a long time, I was sent to Bangkok for five days of R&R. I never got to Saigon, though."

When queried about his job as a "tunnel rat," Bob explained, "The VC had tunnels and bunkers built all through the jungle and used them for cover. When we came across them, we would have to clear them out and destroy the tunnels."



Bob Simonelli on duty in the central highlands of Vietnam in 1967.

The men that were assigned to go into the tunnels got to be known as tunnel rats. I was small and often got that assignment. We always carried a flashlight, a .45 pistol and an M-16 rifle." Very reluctantly, Bob relates that when they encountered the Viet Cong, they "did what they had to do."

In true military precision, the Army returned Bob to the States a year to the day he went overseas.

He returned to Ft. Dix where he served as a drill instructor with the rank of E-4 for seven months until his discharge on Oct. 16, 1968. Among his military decorations were the Combat Infantry Badge and the Vietnam Campaign Medal. Bob returned to Lawrence and worked in the construction trade for the next 20 years, and then became a U.S. Postal Service carrier at the Circle Branch where he is presently employed.

When asked about the public anti-military sentiment and lack of support of servicemen on his return from Vietnam, Bob admits that it bothered him at first, but he got used to it. Among his friends and

relatives in Lawrence it had never been a problem, and he blended in with other veterans of World War II and Korea.

After the Vietnam Memorial was dedicated on Nov. 11, 1982, Bob visited the memorial to locate the names of the friends that he knew and had lost during the war.

On Sept. 12, 1990, Nancy Bole and Bob were married. They have one son, Robert Jr., daughter-in-law Dana, and a grandson, Anthoni, who was born Aug. 20, 1993. As he had done with Robert

Jr., the day Anthoni was born, Bob enrolled him in the Sons of the American Legion. Bob joined Post 414 after his discharge from the Army and went on to become post commander in 1988, 1989, 1990, and presently serves in 1995.

Bob and Nancy make their home at 76 Hoover Ave. Bob enjoys playing golf, but his true love is the Legion. Over the years both Bob and Nancy have been active in all phases of Legion activities, and

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Veteran

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with the addition of Anthoni, they represent four generations of a truly American Legion family.

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The United States intervention in Vietnam sharply divided Americans, and much of the dissatisfaction was taken out on the military by lack of support or outright rejection. Whether our philosophy had been right or wrong, the men and women who served during those difficult times did as they were directed, and did so with dedication and honor. They fought and they died, and they earned their rightful place in our nation's history.

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 a 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 material should be sent to The Lawrence Township Veterans Memorial Committee, P.O. Box 55966, Trenton, N.J. 08638. Inquires may be made by calling 882-9108.