



Belated recognition for unsung heroism in Vietnam war zone

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Vietnam veteran Thomas Clarke of Pleasant Plains, who enlisted when he was 17, with the Valorous Unit Award.

By JILLIAN TARATUNIO

STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. -- More than 40 years after dodging his last bullet in Vietnam, where he built supply routes for U.S. troops, Thomas Clarke's Army engineer company has received the high military honors its members have been seeking.

Clarke, a Tottenville resident, reunited with fellow soldiers from the 137th Engineer Company at Fort Knox in Kentucky for the formal presentation of the Valorous Unit Award for its "extraordinary acts of heroism."

The honor, presented earlier this month, is the second-highest unit award bestowed by the Army, a notch below the Presidential Unit Citation.

The members of Clarke's unit, part of the 19th Combat Engineer Battalion, endured monsoons and ever-

present sniper fire, while navigating terrain fraught with land mines. Clarke drove a five-ton dump truck to create a land supply route for the infantry units. He emphasized that his fellow soldiers operated as a single entity, each playing an instrumental role in the war.

"We were chosen because of what we did. We went out every day knowing we had tasks to complete, and we just prayed we got back that night," Clarke said.

He pointed out that the honor was richly deserved.

"Combat engineers go unrecognized for what they do in combat zones. They've gone to war and risked their lives everyday since World War II," said Clarke.

During the Battle of Tam Quan in December 1967, the 19th Battalion fought alongside the 1st Cavalry. Two bulldozers from the battalion destroyed the bunkers and cleared a pathway.

From the 19th Battalion, 105 men were killed in action and 400 were wounded in Vietnam between 1967 and 1968. Clarke and the 19th Battalion raised funds to erect a monument at Fort Knox to honor those who were killed.

Clarke returned to the U.S. in May 1969. He moved to Staten Island in 1979 from Flatbush, Brooklyn. After working for the Department of Corrections until 1973, he worked for the NYPD. He graduated from St. Francis College in Brooklyn in 1978. Clarke retired in 1986.

"I was shocked about the response people gave us. People either totally disrespected us, or didn't recognize us. We came back with such a cloud over us. No wanted to admit to being a part of it. We paid a price on the battlefield and at home," he said.

Clarke learned of the award during a battalion reunion in 2005. The commanding general for engineers in Vietnam requested the award in 1969, Clarke said, but the movement did not gain momentum until members of the unit pressed for the honor over the last few years.

Clarke contacted former Rep. Vito Fossella, who wrote a congressional referral to the Department of the Army.

Four years later, the battalion received the award for its actions in Vietnam between July 1967 and December 1968.

Soldiers in the 19th Battalion who served in Iraq and Afghanistan arranged for the presentation of the award at Fort Knox. The veterans' families were invited to attend.

"Looking back, in firefights, I wasn't scared. When my friends were ambushed and I had to put them in body

bags, then I got scared. Every day I got up and I was thankful because I knew I had another day on earth," said Clarke.

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