

Webster-Kirkwood Times Missouri

November 10, 2017



Vietnam War veteran Tom Hopkins speaks to Webster Groves High School students on Wednesday, Nov. 8. Photo by Ursula Ruhl

Longtime Glendale resident Tom Hopkins served in the U.S. Marine Corps from 1960-1967, and is a Vietnam War veteran.

Hopkins recently shared stories from his time in Vietnam with students at Webster Groves High School for Veterans Day. What follows is a first-person account of some of his experiences.

It's been 52 years since I was in Vietnam. In some ways, it seems like only yesterday. I was 24 years old when I landed on that beach in Vietnam on May 7, 1965, but my memories of that time remain very clear.

One of those is the helicopter-borne assault on Ky Xuan Island located just off the coast of South Vietnam. In June of 1965, our battalion was given the task of clearing a suspected group of Viet Cong from the island. I was the leader of the battalion's anti-tank platoon at the time.

On the day of the operation, we were immediately faced with a problem – the vehicle that carried the anti-tank gun would not start. While we were trying to get the vehicle started, our protecting infantry had moved out. Suddenly, we were all alone.

About that time we noticed a small gun boat approaching from the west. It was a wooden-hulled boat with eyes painted on the bow, and it was firing machine guns toward the beach. At first we thought it might belong to the enemy.



U.S. Marine Tom Hopkins, a Vietnam veteran, served from 1960 to 1967.

The boat kept getting closer and closer, and the corporal assigned to man the gun asked my permission to open fire. Even if the boat had belonged to the South Vietnamese Navy, I didn't want any of my Marines to become victims of a "friendly fire" incident.

I told the corporal not to fire yet. It was a tough decision since the boat was coming closer and still firing. About the time I decided to allow the corporal to fire, the boat turned back to the west. It was then that I noticed the South Vietnamese flag on the stern of the boat.

There have been reports of many deaths caused by "friendly fire" during the Vietnam War. Thank God we were not party of one of those incidents. Making the decision not to open fire on that boat was probably the most important decision I made during my entire year in Vietnam – and maybe in my entire 77 years.

Hopkins also shared his experience of returning from Vietnam.

It was a cold and snowy day when I arrived at the airport in my hometown of Omaha, Neb., in 1966. What a great feeling! I had made it out of Vietnam alive and would be back with my family.

What I remember most about my homecoming was seeing my wife, Kaethe, our newborn baby girl, Kristine, and our 2-year-old son Tommy.

I was on one side of the living room and Tommy and his mother were on the other side. Tommy seemed confused ... but he looked at a picture of me on the coffee table and then suddenly seemed to recognize me. He then ran over to me with a big smile on his face and we hugged each other. That moment was one of the happiest moments of my life, and the memory of it still has the power to bring tears to my eyes.

I believe it's important for all of you to understand that freedom is not free. Some service men and women have paid the ultimate price for the freedom that you enjoy every day. All veterans have paid a price in one way or another for your freedom. Some veterans continue to pay that price every day for injuries that they sustained in the service.

I hope you take time today to think about the price that has been paid by all veterans for your freedom. The freedom that you enjoy should never be taken for granted.

Hopkins and his wife, Kaethe, have been married for 55 years and have lived in Glendale for the past 46 years. They raised four children, all of whom graduated from Kirkwood High School.

This Veterans Day, Hopkins' would also like to remember his great-grandfather, Edmund Mustard (1843-1928), who served in the Union Army's 59th Indiana Infantry Regiment during the Civil War.