

Vietnam-era CCB

crews honored

JO3 Beth Johnson

Navy Compass Staff Writer

NAVAL AMPHIBIOUS BASE - "This is incredible, I'm so happy this happened and I'm very happy to be here," said Capt. Tom Kelly USN (ret), at a ceremony held last Saturday at Naval Amphibious Base Coronado, honoring the soldiers and Sailors who served aboard Command Communications Boats in the Vietnam conflict.

Kelly, who commanded River Assault Division 152 in 1968 and '69 and received a Medal of Honor as and a Purple Heart for his actions in Vietnam was one of several hundred veterans and family members who gathered to pay tribute to each other and those who gave their lives in carrying out their duties.

The CCBs were the waterborne communications platform for the joint Navy and Army operations during search and destroy missions in the Mekong Delta of South Vietnam. The actions and positioning of Naval units and ground troops were controlled from the CCBs. Tactical communications were monitored and maintained with all Army field operations commanders, helicopter gunships, ground units, Navy forces, and other U.S. and South Vietnamese forces involved in combat operations.

The CCBs, 66 feet long, and 17 and a half feet wide, contained eight racks and no galley. Kelly said living in such close quarters with the other people in his crew created bonds that were closer than family.

"We bonded out there in a way that someone who wasn't there will never understand. We call ourselves brothers, but we were closer than brothers. That's the most amazing thing about being here today. I haven't seen some of these guys in more than 30 years, but we loved each other then and we love each other now. We're as close as we ever were," he said.

CCBs participated in every joint Army/Navy offensive sweep operations against Vietcong strongholds in the Mekong Delta. They carried the Naval squadron commanders and the Army battalion operations staff who directed the operations. After Army ground troops were inserted, the CCBs remained in the area to provide gunfire support when called upon by combat ground forces. Operations typically lasted about a week.

A retired Army Lt. Gen. Patrick Hughes was a platoon leader of the 9th infantry, the Army unit that deployed with the CCBs. During the ceremony, and expressed his gratitude to the people who helped make the memorial a reality.

"I commend all the Navy leadership for supporting this memorial on their base. This is an important part of our history and I'm glad to see it preserved for future generations of Sailors and soldiers. This memorial is for the Army/Navy team, and I am so happy and so proud to see it done here," said Hughes.



Gunner's Mate Master Chief (Master Diver) Chet Stanley carries a wreath to a small table laid out in honor of MIA's and POW's from the small boat units in Vietnam. Official U.S. Navy photo by JO3 Beth Johnson.

The memorial is located at the Council International Du Sport Militaire Field at NAB. The memorial consists of a swift boat, a patrol river boat and a command communication boat.

In front of the boats is a wall, which when finished will bear flags and plaques with the names, rates, unit names and awards of those killed in action or missing in action while serving in a river patrol.

The motivation behind the memorial came from Ralph Fries, a retired chief warrant officer who served aboard a patrol boat during the Vietnam War.

"In 1986, I saw the Mobile Vietnam Memorial Wall. It is a beautiful and moving tribute to those who paid the ultimate price, but I wanted to see more. The wall at CISM is the reality of that desire, and is set to be finished in 2004. Volunteers are doing all the work for the memorial.

The dedication ceremony was held on a sunny afternoon, with the many flags gently swaying in the breeze. Next to the CCB, a small table was set, the place of honor traditionally reserved for those MIA and POW's. As a bugler played taps, two wreaths were placed on the sides of the table. As the last notes faded, William Reynolds, who had been an Army Sgt. aboard a CCB said, "For those of you that are here. I welcome you and am happy to see you all. For those who are not, don't ever think yourselves forgotten. You are remembered and missed. You will always be our brothers."