

Information gathered by Judy Allen July 12, 2023

Dante Belvin life and military career.

Helicopter mechanic in Vietnam

Specialist E-4 Dante Belvin said he served in the U.S. Army from 1964-1966. He was a mechanic on Huey A and B helicopters and the small H13. "We called it a little bubble job," he said. Belvin served with the 1st Calvary Division. "We started out as the 11th Air Assault, but after the division was sent overseas the Division was changed to 1st Calvary."

Prior to the Division shipping out to Vietnam, Belvin and six other mechanics were sent to a town to disassemble helicopters so they could be loaded onto a large cargo plane. He said they spent close to two weeks preparing the helicopters for shipment. Since they were off base, Belvin and his team received per diem to pay for their own lodging and meals.

Once the helicopters were on the C130 transport aircraft, Belvin and his crew were told to, 'Get on the plane.' Belvin said the aircraft was full of other people – fully loaded. The day was a hot one.

"When it is hot, you don't have the 'lift' on the planes like when it is cooler," said Belvin. We started down that runway, and shut it down and came back. They tried it again and shut it down again because they couldn't get off the ground." Belvin said the weight of the fully loaded plane would not allow it to leave the runway in the hot temperature. "The third try, we got off the ground!" The people on the plane weren't told their destination, but everyone expected it would be Vietnam. "We stopped at Wake Island and at Hawaii to refuel. Then we lost an engine and stopped somewhere – I don't know where that was." Belvin said the people were allowed off the plane for a while during repairs.

"We were on that plane 54 hours. Everybody was tired. If you got up out of your seat to go to the restroom or any other reason, someone was laying in your spot when you came back. We landed in South Vietnam," said Belvin.

"I went over on what they call an advance party. The plane we were on was loaded with our group of seven and people from other companies," said Belvin. "They unloaded us and told us to wait there 'until someone comes to get you.' We waited, and this Major came after about three days. He said 'You boys from D Company?' and we said, 'yes' and he said, 'come with me.' We got on a plane, and again, it was loaded with other people."

They flew to An Khê, Vietnam. Belvin said, "We were told 'When the doors to the plane open, gather up everything you've got and run for that hill up yonder.' I always did what I was told. When that back door came down, I came out like a racehorse. I ran for the top of that hill and I was the first one there. I ran twice as far as I needed to, because I was zig-zagging like I had seen in movies. I was expecting to get shot at, but no one was shooting at us!"

As an advance team, Belvin and his small crew, along with personnel from other companies and contracted Vietnamese workers, created the camp and facilities. "We started building a landing field," he said. Belvin said they stayed there for about 20 days before the ships with troops arrived. "Some of those boys from my company stayed on those ships 40-some-odd days."

Belvin said, "When they got unloaded they came to camp. One helicopter went down on the way. We had to go out and get it. We sling-loaded the copter out. They were shooting at us

then!” Belvin explained that smaller helicopters would get a sling around them that was attached to a larger helicopter so they could be lifted and flown to a repair location.

“As the troops started arriving, everyone went to our camp, right out in the jungle. It is called Camp Radcliff now, but didn’t have a name then!”

Belvin said the members of his small team from D Company were always on guard duty. “A Major came in and asked the guy in command why we were the ones always on guard duty. The Major was told ‘They have been here longer. These new ones would get us all killed.’ That was good enough for him and that was good enough for me, too!”

Belvin said, “I stayed there at An Khê the whole time I was in Vietnam – the entire year. Of course, we went out in the field some.”

Work was constant. “We had to work on those helicopters from 7 in the morning until 9 at night. Sometimes we worked all night to get a helicopter ready to fly the next morning. If we worked all night, we would get half a day off,” said Belvin.

“I was so proud to be doing that. I wasn’t out there getting shot at. Others would have to get on those helicopters and go out where they were getting shot at. I wanted to keep them in the air!”

Belvin said, “We had an inspector for the helicopters - he would go over it with a fine-tooth comb, write it up and send us out to fix (any problems). Anything we did on the helicopter, we were proud to put our initials by it. I had one ‘copter come in that I had worked on. When I saw the tail number on the one coming in, I thought, ‘I worked on that helicopter!’” It had flown for more than fifty hours after Belvin’s work. “After that length of time, it becomes the crew chief’s job to take care of it,” he said. “The short shaft was leaking. The crew chief had written it up but did not bring it back to us to fix it. It went down and some people were hurt.”

When helicopters went down, Belvin said, “If it was a minor problem we would fix it in the field; if it was a major problem we would send it back to camp. We worked on a helicopter and signed our initials to what we had done. We had a test pilot. He wouldn’t fly unless someone who worked on it went with him. I did a lot of flying and enjoyed it. I was out in the field one time and we had some mortar rounds come in,” he said.

“Once they brought a helicopter in and it had a problem with the gear box. A man named Martin was an E-5 and in charge, and he and I were sent after dark to work on the helicopter with a flashlight.” The two talked about it not being very smart to be out at night with flashlights, making them more visible to the enemy. They didn’t have any problems that night, and got the helicopter fixed. The next night the helicopter was parked at the same place. It got “blew all to pieces” when twelve mortar rounds hit it.

Belvin said, “I had a commanding officer who was smart as a whip but did not have a lick of sense. Where we set up our camp, when it rained, it would flood almost up into our tents. A deuce and a half truck crossing a bridge got washed off in swift water. The officer had the entire Company filling sandbags, because he wanted to stop that water. A Sergeant said, ‘Where does he think this water is going to go if we stop it? It will just back up in our tents.’”

Belvin said the most difficult thing about military life was not being home – or where he wanted to be. He said, “I was in Oklahoma City when I was drafted. I was doing roofing work and thought I would like something different. Everyone would say they could use me, but wanted to know if I had military obligation out of the way. I volunteered through the draft and it wasn’t two weeks before I had my letter.

"I passed the physical. They sent me to a motel eight blocks from where I lived. They took me out and put me on a plane the next morning."

Basic for Belvin was at Fort Polk, then he was sent to helicopter school in Alabama. "We were trained on helicopters and fixed-wing planes." He was then sent to Fort Benning near Columbus, Georgia.

When asked about animals on the base, Belvin said, "I never saw it, but heard when we got ready to ship out, some lady near Fort Benning asked if a mule could be taken as a mascot. We took that mule. The boys on the ship didn't know anything about animals and about seven days out, ran out of food for the mule. It was fed out of the mess hall to keep it alive. I heard some people branded it *US Navy* and were prosecuted for cruelty for animals."

Belvin said, "The mule wasn't at Vietnam very long. Someone on guard duty one night said, 'Halt! Advance and be recognized.' Well, the mule didn't listen (or respond) and the guard shot and killed it. I think they court martialed him for not knowing what he was shooting at."

It was a serious offense, according to Belvin, and the mule incident wasn't the only time it happened. He said, "Some boys were on duty one night and they heard something. They fired off five or six rounds apiece, even though they couldn't see anything. Those boys were court martialed for not knowing what they were shooting at. And fined 50 dollars a bullet."

Belvin told of a man who while Belvin was working on the helicopters who looked at his name badge and said, "Belvin where are you from?" - turned out the other man was also from Boswell.

Belvin said he and Loretta were married after he returned home. His parents were Henry and Sarah Belvin. "Daddy was caretaker of Wheelock Academy at the time. There were 11 kids in the family. I am the oldest one still alive. I have a sister and brother younger than me. I have a nephew younger than me who was also in Vietnam".

Belvin smiled and said, "We were poor folks growing up and I loved the chow in the mess hall. I never ate so good in my life."

Medals and commendations included the Vietnam Service Medal; National Defense Service Medal; and recognition as Marksman Rifle.

When service ended, Belvin was still in South Vietnam. "They shipped me back from there!"

When he came home, he did roofing work for a while, then went to college on the GI Bill. He retired from teaching school at Broken Bow. His wife Loretta was also a teacher.

"I wouldn't take for my military experience. I think it affected my life for the good. I think the military taught discipline and responsibility."

Belvin took a year and a half away from school as a teenager to help his father with carpentry work. His mom encouraged him to go back and he went back mid-term. He was in 9th grade. Everybody else had study hall and five classes – he took study hall and six classes to make up credits. The principal told him he was a half credit short of graduating when he was a senior. A biology teacher volunteered to stay with Belvin after school so he could get that half credit!

He and Loretta have one daughter, Katosha, and two granddaughters – Elli and Gabbe. His advice for future generations: "Find somebody you can look up to who is dependable and responsible and kind of mold your life after them."

What does he wish more people knew about veterans? "I don't want anything from the veterans. I just wanted to come back and be who I was," said Belvin.

