

Missouri State Society Daughters of the American Revolution

Proudly Honors

Patriot of the Month

July 2023



Robert C. Burns

United States Army

Sponsored by:
Platte Purchase Chapter, NSDAR

On Christmas Eve of 1965, Robert C Burns received word he had been drafted into the Army even though he had an established dental practice in Platte Woods, MO. In May 1966, he found himself at Fort Sam Houston, TX for basic training. From there he went to Fort Carson, in Colorado Springs, CO.



After ten months, he was flown to Vietnam. He landed at Tan Son Nhat Air Force Base near Saigon. He was immediately aware of the vast difference in weather compared to home. He was assigned to the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment and stationed in the middle of nowhere-the jungle about thirty-five miles from Saigon. When he arrived at the base camp, it had scarcely been constructed and his tent was not finished. There was no dental equipment waiting. Captain Burns was the only dentist in the 37th Medical Company but ended up doing more medical work than dentistry. He was the only dental surgeon to serve 5000 troops in the 11th ACR. Robert did medical and dental surgery on both Cavalry and civilian personnel. He traveled in Armored personnel carriers or helicopters such as the Huey and Chinook to get to the people he needed to treat be they American or South Vietnamese soldiers or villagers.

He visited the village of Cambai several times and was acquainted with the village Chief and the Priest, Father John. The people of this village were called Montagnard – an indigenous group who had beliefs closer aligned to the States than the North Vietnamese. Father John ran an orphanage and through communications to the Parkville, Mo ladies, including his mother, Dr. Burns arranged to have three barrels of Children's clothes delivered from the States for the children of the village.

Besides this village, Robert flew all over in Huey helicopters providing medical services to soldiers and other villagers. It was difficult to read the people because they had been influenced by the French, but were Vietnamese. They were small, and not in general good health. It was difficult to tell how old anyone was. He was particularly shocked by the difference in the standard of living of the average Vietnamese to the standard of living in the U.S. There was no comparison.

Many times he performed emergency procedures and had to work in hostile territory. He constantly felt the danger. He was there during the Tet Offensive. He feels the American Press misrepresented the

situation for whatever reason as the American Forces were more successful than reported. After a while, he quit making friends because he lost so many previously made.

Life was very hard because there was so much tragedy and death. Nurses and Doctors constantly immersed in the worst scenes of soldiers maimed and bodies piled up, began to suffer from PTSD right there on the job. The smells of blood and dirt were particularly ingrained. To this day Dr. Burns has flashbacks if he hears a Huey or a Chinook helicopter. He was advised to not volunteer for anything but he felt the need to volunteer anyway as his skills were unique. By the time he was due to come home, he had built up a dental facility at the base camp. He was awarded the Bronze Star for his service to his country in hostile territory.

Finally, his time was up in the spring of 1968, and he was returned to San Francisco where he was out-processed. Because of the shock of returning from constant danger to the States, he doesn't remember a lot as he traveled to Springfield, Ill. to meet his family who was living there while he was gone. He returned to civilian life, his Dental practice, his family, his wife, and three children. He worked in his practice for 45 years. His dental practice is still ongoing in the care of his son and grandson.

He later was told he would be in the Army Reserves for four years. He found that it was dangerous to wear his uniform as the soldiers were treated very badly. But in a few months, he decided he needed to share his experiences to help others understand the returning soldier. He began going to various groups and discussing his experiences in Vietnam. He believes this helped him miss the worst of possible PTSD and helped educate the American population about a truth they had not been given. He believes he is a better man because he was able to perform and survive and somewhat move on from the harrowing experiences in war. In addition, he has a wider understanding of the world in general.

By the time the four years were up, he decided to stay in the Reserves. He served for thirty-two years and retired in 2000 as a full Colonel at an O6 level. He was on the staff of four generals and often traveled internationally performing his duties.

He is a member of the American Legion and has served on many boards such as President of Rotary, Southern Platte Board of Trustees, Board of Park Hill Education Foundation, Platte Senior Services, and currently on the board of the South Platte Ambulance District. He served on the Park University board for ten years. He helped found the First National Bank of Platte County which eventually was taken over by U S Bank. Dr. Burns continues to contribute to society in his retirement.

The Platte Purchase Chapter is honored to have Dr. Robert Burns as their Patriot of the Month.