

Vietnam veteran reflects 50 years after helicopter blade strikes his head

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Ron Esselstyn's memories just before a moving helicopter blade slammed into his head are burned into his brain.

The 22-year-old and several other soldiers had been cruising low over the Vietnamese countryside 50 years ago on a search-and-destroy mission. The Huey chopper landed in a rice paddy and Esselstyn jumped out, only to startle when a North Vietnamese sniper popped up from the weeds and pointed his weapon at the young American. Esselstyn veered off-balance and straight into the helicopter's tail rotor.

He later learned his fellow soldiers had shot the sniper and prepared themselves mentally to bag Esselstyn's body, before realizing their cohort had actually survived, but "I was a bloody mess," Esselstyn said.

His parents received a Western Union telegram revealing that their son had suffered a severe head injury. His condition was "guarded." The helicopter blade hit with such force that surgeons had removed pieces of Esselstyn's fiberglass helmet from his brain.

Despite his dire condition, Esselstyn survived. He wore a head cast for months to shield the spot where the rotor had sheared his skull. When the swelling subsided, doctors installed a protective plate over the exposed brain. Hair regrew on his runway-shaped noggin. The veteran completed college and secured a job as a Umatilla County tax appraiser. Not only did he walk again, Esselstyn eventually took up marathon running.

During the last couple of decades, however, Esselstyn has struggled with declining balance. Medical issues forced him to retire about 24 years ago from the assessor's office. These days, he sees the world mostly from a wheelchair, his running shoes and hiking boots sitting unused at the back of his closet.

On Thursday, August 20 — 50 years to the day from when he was struck in the head — Esselstyn observed the event by traveling to a haven for wounded warriors called Divide Camp near Joseph.

He, wife Sue Esselstyn, nephew Justin Wagner, and caregiver Reg Quinn headed for Divide Camp, negotiating a twisting dirt road and a multitude of prize-winning potholes in the Esselstyn's SUV. Waiting for them at the camp was Julie Wheeler, the warm and gregarious woman who created the refuge so wounded veterans of wars in Afghanistan and Iraq could fish, hunt, hike or simply experience solitude. The 40-acre compound, once an elk camp for Wheeler's family, now includes

several cabins geared for physically and psychologically challenged veterans. Recently, Wheeler hosted her first group of female veterans for a writing workshop. The place runs on donations and grants.

When Sue called in April to ask permission for Ron to visit on the anniversary of his war injury, Wheeler didn't hesitate.

Last Thursday, Esselstyn, sporting red, white and blue and a hat with the words "American Patriot," shook Wheeler's hand. At her gentle direction, he moved directly from his vehicle into an Action Trackchair, a part wheelchair, part tank, powered by two marine batteries. With treads instead of wheels, the track chair allows hunters, hikers and fishermen with disabilities to explore trails and ford small streams. The all-terrain chair sports a gun rack and fishing rod holder

Esselstyn practiced using a tiny joystick to propel the chair, at first frowning in concentration, but finally flashing Wheeler a bright smile. Around him, birds twittered. A warm breeze blew.

Freedom.

After a tour of the grounds conducted by Wheeler, the group sipped ice tea and lemonade at a picnic table, joined by Gary Parraga, a Vietnam-era veteran who served in Germany. Wheeler's two dogs, a heeler/coyote named Dixie and a corgi/Chihuahua called Gracie, sprawled nearby. Esselstyn and Parraga compared notes and marveled that they both had attended Army military police school at Fort Gordon in Georgia.

Esselstyn relayed the story of his encounter with the North Vietnamese sniper and the helicopter blade.

Afterwards, Sue reached into a box she had brought from Pendleton and lifted out the cast Ron had worn to protect his injured brain. Ron modeled the cast for the group, his eyes going somewhere far away. He refocused, took off the cast and handed it back to Sue. Parraga shook his head in wonder as he watched.

"The big boss in the sky wanted to keep you around," he said.

Esselstyn smiled.

"I guess he did."

That afternoon, Esselstyn chatted with another Vietnam veteran visiting the retreat, Ron Wagner, a helicopter pilot who oddly enough had witnessed another soldier collide with a helicopter tail rotor about a year after Esselstyn's injury. The Pendleton veteran shook his head in wonder at the coincidence.

He never received a Purple Heart after his injury, since he was technically an "advisor," not a combat troop.