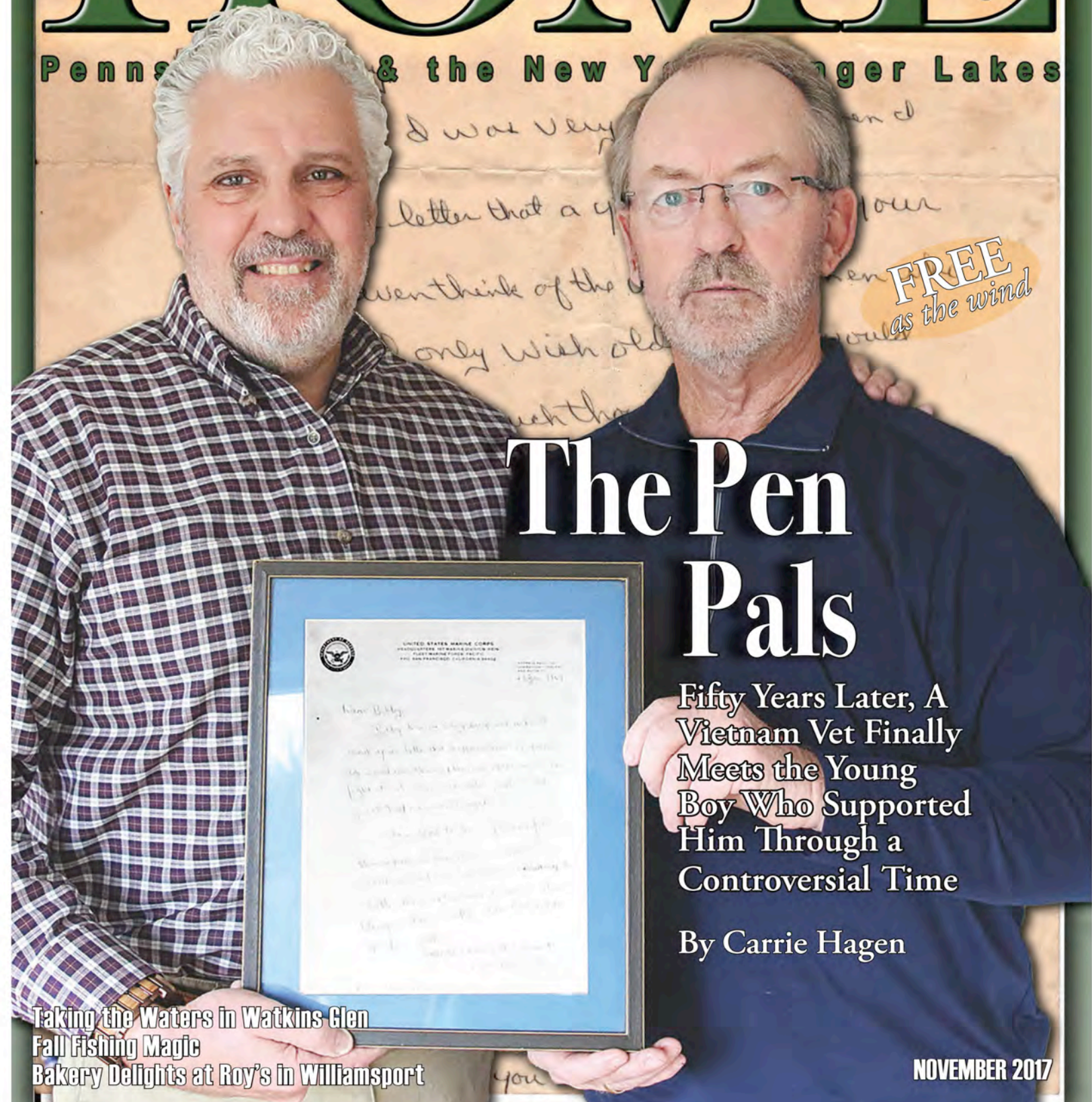


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## The Pen Pals

Fifty Years Later, A  
Vietnam Vet Finally  
Meets the Young  
Boy Who Supported  
Him Through a  
Controversial Time

By Carrie Hagen

Taking the Waters in Watkins Glen  
Fall Fishing Magic  
Bakery Delights at Roy's in Williamsport

NOVEMBER 2017



UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS  
 HEADQUARTERS, 1ST MARINE DIVISION (REIN)  
 FLEET MARINE FORCE, PACIFIC  
 FPO, SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA 96602

ADDRESS REPLY TO:  
 COMMANDING GENERAL  
 AND REFER TO:  
 23, Jan. 1967

Dear Bobby,  
 Bobby I was very surprised when I read your letter that a young man of your age would even think of the war of the men who fight it. I only wish older people would give it half as much thought.

I am glad to hear you are from Pennsylvania. I am from Wellsboro, Penna. which is about 50 miles north of Wellcamp better known as the home of Penna's Grand Canyon. I am a little older (20) but thank you for writing.  
 Take care + may God Bless You.  
 R.F.C. Richard Hamblin  
 U.S. M.C.

P.S. I am sure you will find new friends : : : :

# The Pen Pals

Fifty Years Later, A Vietnam Vet Finally Meets the Young Boy Who Supported Him Through a Controversial Time

By Carrie Hagen

In December of 1966, Dick Hamblin arrived in Da Nang, a territory of coastal plains and mountain ranges in the northernmost region of South Vietnam. Da Nang City held the main U.S. airbase during the Vietnam War; outside the city limits, the rural midlands hid Viet Cong guerrillas fighting to secure Communist control of the countryside. As part of the 1st Marine Division, Dick Hamblin spent thirteen months on a rice paddy along a hillside north of Da Nang City.

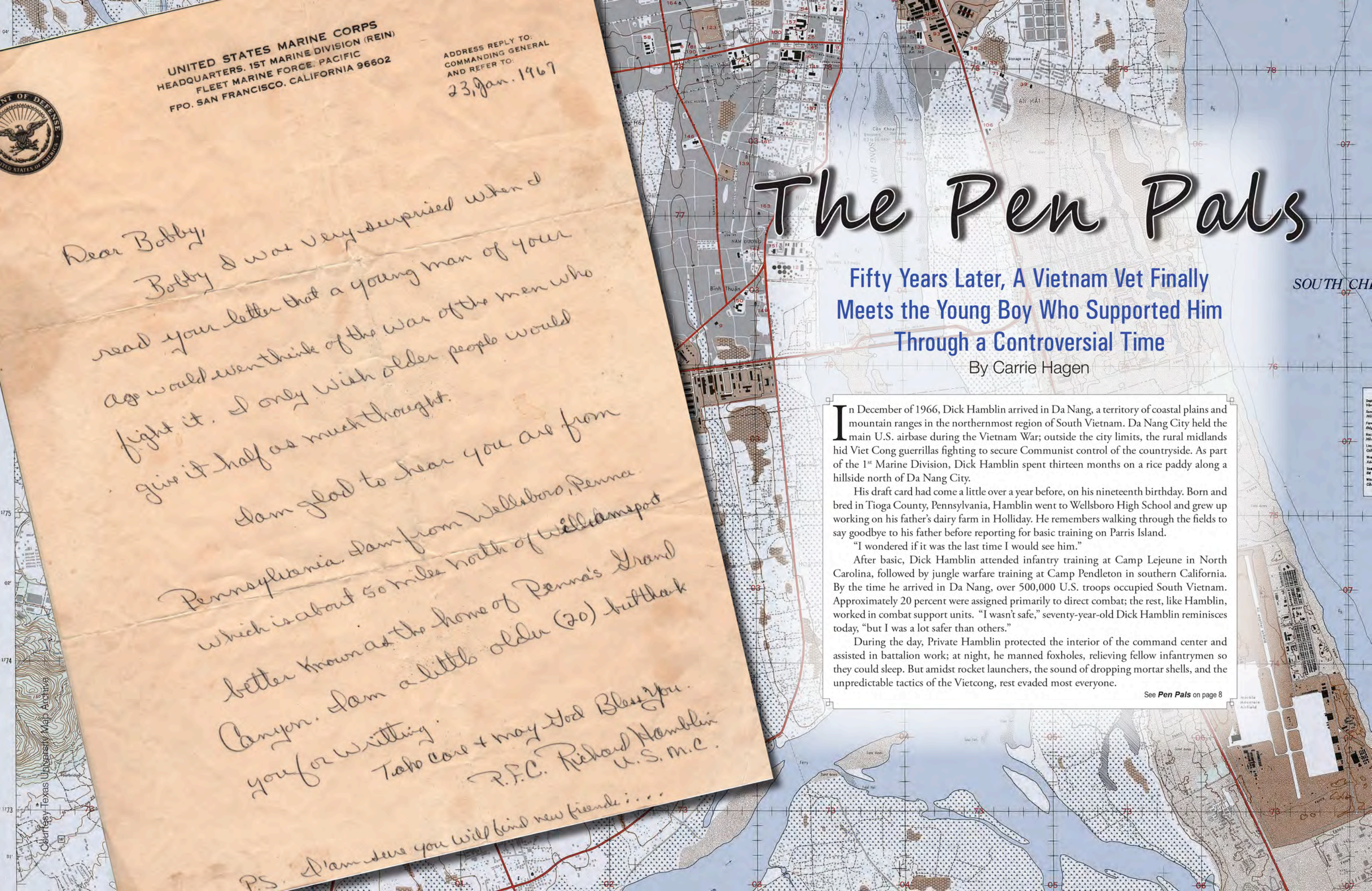
His draft card had come a little over a year before, on his nineteenth birthday. Born and bred in Tioga County, Pennsylvania, Hamblin went to Wellsboro High School and grew up working on his father's dairy farm in Holliday. He remembers walking through the fields to say goodbye to his father before reporting for basic training on Parris Island.

"I wondered if it was the last time I would see him."

After basic, Dick Hamblin attended infantry training at Camp Lejeune in North Carolina, followed by jungle warfare training at Camp Pendleton in southern California. By the time he arrived in Da Nang, over 500,000 U.S. troops occupied South Vietnam. Approximately 20 percent were assigned primarily to direct combat; the rest, like Hamblin, worked in combat support units. "I wasn't safe," seventy-year-old Dick Hamblin reminisces today, "but I was a lot safer than others."

During the day, Private Hamblin protected the interior of the command center and assisted in battalion work; at night, he manned foxholes, relieving fellow infantrymen so they could sleep. But amidst rocket launchers, the sound of dropping mortar shells, and the unpredictable tactics of the Vietcong, rest evaded most everyone.

See *Pen Pals* on page 8



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Photo © Linda Stager

Pen Pals continued from page 7

"There was no off duty, really. You worked, took guard duty, or you tried to sleep," remembers Hamblin. "It was the longest thirteen months of my life. I just lived one day at a time. You wanted to go home." And he did, in February of 1968.

After his honorable discharge, Dick Hamblin returned to Tioga County, eventually taking ownership of the family dairy farm with his brothers. In the early 1980s, after attending night courses at Corning Community and Mansfield colleges, he sold his business shares to his brothers and worked as a loan officer. Later, he moved to West Virginia and became a bank president.

For nearly fifty years, Dick Hamblin didn't talk about his Vietnam experience—not to his two wives, his three daughters, his friends, or his colleagues. And then, about a year ago, his wife, Mary Lee, said a man named Bob Cranmer had left a message for him on her cell phone. The voice—one he had only before heard on paper—would reopen a chapter of Hamblin's life, offering a new context for a story he had never told.

"I don't know any Bob Cranmer," Dick told his wife, ignoring the request for a return call. Bob Cranmer phoned again. Returning the message at his wife's insistence, Hamblin came to recognize the name: it was that of a ten-year-old kid from Pittsburgh who had written to him during the war nearly fifty years before.

"Dick was always in the back of my mind," says Bob Cranmer, now sixty-one, a former commissioner of Allegheny County. The youngest of three sons to a homemaker and a retired Army officer, Cranmer grew up with romantic notions of the military.

"My dad was fifty when I was born," he chuckles. "When he was in the Army, people still rode horses in combat." Bob loved hearing his father's war stories and aspired to enter the Army just like his dad. In November of 1966, as he sat at his kitchen table, his mom showed her military-minded son an advertisement in the *Army Times*.

"It said something like, 'If you would like to send a letter to a serviceman, send it here.'" So he wrote a letter and sent it to any soldier who might read it. He included a personal touch, mentioning that he was sad about a friend's moving away.

Dick Hamblin had only been in Vietnam a few weeks when someone handed him Bob Cranmer's letter. "It was probably the guy who distributed the mail," he recalls. "He said this kid wanted to correspond with us." Private Hamblin was lonely and tired. Against a backdrop of intermittent explosions, he lived out of a tent without access to hot water, and he was exhausted from working consecutive days and nights. After a colleague of his wrote to the makers of "NoDoz" caffeine tablets, the company sent a bunch to his platoon. Dick says they fed on the pills until the medic told them to stop.

"I was just a zombie."

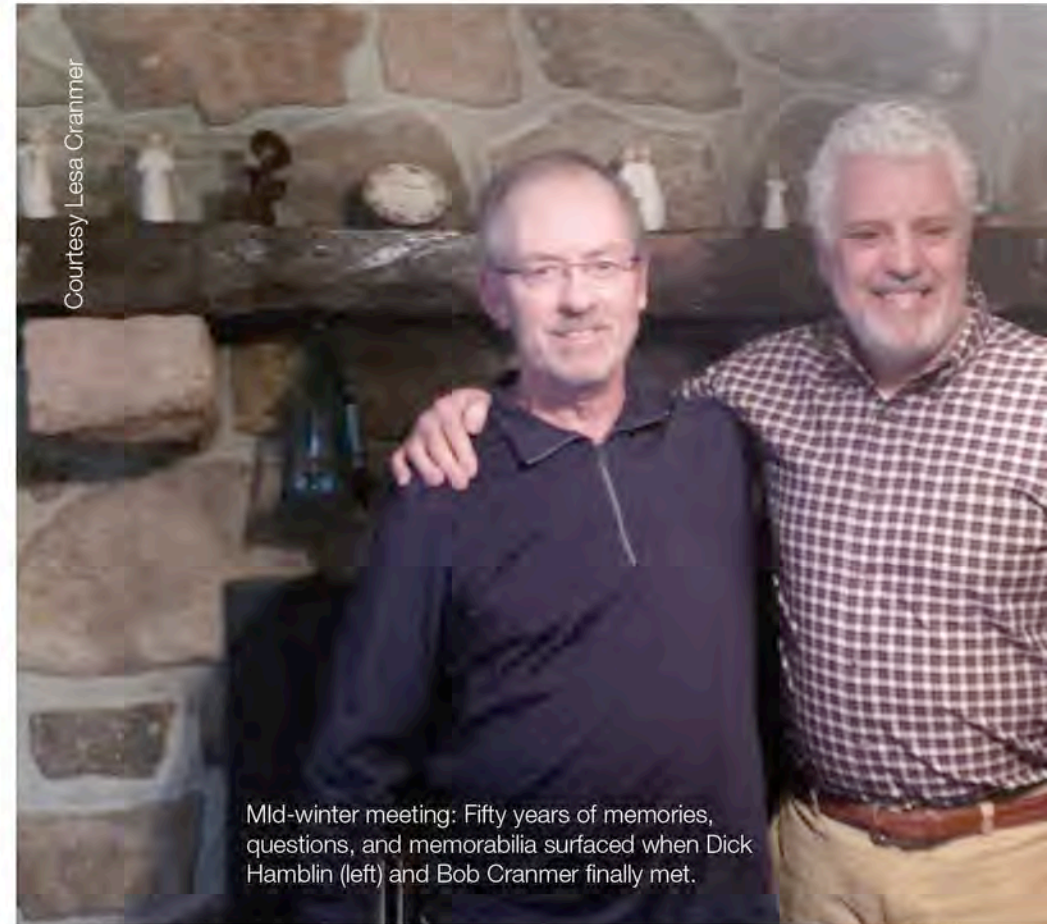
More than fatigue, he says paranoia "tore people up." He gives, as an example, his memory of a young boy who served the First Marine Division as one of many Vietnamese civilians. The boy was a regular at the command post, taking clothes away to clean and bringing them back so frequently that military police stopped frisking him—until one day, when a suspicious MP stopped and searched him. The boy's laundry sack contained a

See Pen Pals on page 10

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Courtesy Lesa Cranmer

Mid-winter meeting: Fifty years of memories, questions, and memorabilia surfaced when Dick Hamblin (left) and Bob Cranmer finally met.

Pen Pals continued from page 8

bag of grenades.

"He was going to blow us up," Dick says with a hint of disbelief. "You didn't know where the enemy was coming from. You learned to watch people like a hawk."

The atmosphere—full of tension, exhaustion, and an increasing lack of morale—was toxic to a twenty-year-old. "Nobody was saying 'have a nice day,'" Dick emphasizes. So when he opened up the letter from Bobby Cranmer, an idealistic ten-year-old who lionized soldiers, its optimism shocked him.

He wrote back on January 23, 1967. "Dear Bobby,

Bobby I was very surprised when I read your letter that a young man of your age would even think of the war or the men who fight it. I only wish older people would give it half as much thought.

I am glad to hear you are from Pennsylvania. I am from Wellsboro, Penns. which is about 50 miles north of Williamsport better known as the home of Penna's Grand Canyon. I am a little older (20) but thank you for writing.

Take care and may God Bless You,  
P.F.C. Richard Hamblin, U.S.M.C.

P.S. I am sure you will make new friends ...

Over the next year, the two became pen pals, exchanging about ten letters. (This is the only surviving one).

"I was ten years old and a Marine from Vietnam was sending me letters!" Bob Cranmer exclaims, easily channeling his childhood awe. His mom helped him send packages and cookies abroad, and Dick mailed the boy Vietnamese money.

Bob recalls that the soldier wrote one letter by candlelight. Dick remembers the boy's heroic view of the military and his decision to limit his comments to topics like the weather and the food.

Still, he says, "I tried to make it meaningful."

Both remember when the letters stopped: around January of 1968, when Hamblin wrote that his thirteen-month tour was ending, and he could depart from Vietnam at a moment's notice.

The boy wouldn't hear from the Marine again for nearly fifty years.

Lance Corporal Richard Hamblin returned home to Holliday, Pennsylvania, in February 1968, weeks after North



Vietnam launched the Tet Offensive, a surprise series of attacks on South Vietnam that resulted in high casualties. Launched during the “Tet,” or lunar New Year holiday, the well-orchestrated operation further damaged American military morale and propelled anti-war sentiment.

Throughout 1967 and 1968, Tioga County’s daily newspapers covered the war effort. Readers learned about the successful blood drives in the Wellsboro High School gym and the efforts of Rotary clubs and union chapters to collect care packages (what to include: family pictures, Kool-Aid, presweetened drinks, potato sticks, bath powder, band aids). On behalf of the American Red Cross, the papers asked for single women to consider joining the overseas club mobile program, where an American girl could serve the troops by giving them “an hour away from the war” with an “organized recreational program.”

Day after day, the papers published information gleaned from soldiers’ letters and proud family members, including the names of men going or coming from war, their placements and vocations, any awards received, and, of course, obituaries.

On a short leave before his enlistment ended, Dick Hamblin flew from Da Nang to California, and then on to Philadelphia before catching a connection to Elmira, New York. Re-integration, he says, was perhaps the hardest part of his

military experience. Since he had left the States over a year before, psychedelic culture had entered popular culture, and so had hippies, larger protests, and anti-veteran attitudes. Dick wasn’t at all prepared for the negative reception he would immediately receive.

In Philadelphia, police boarded the plane, dismissing civilians before military personnel. Dick and others received escorted passage to their connecting flights as “people spit at us, threw stuff at us.” An even harsher greeting awaited him in Elmira. Upon arrival, Dick was told that the airport was closing and he couldn’t wait inside for his parents. He would have to wait outside, in the frigid cold. After serving the United States in a jungle for thirteen months, twenty-one-year-old Dick Hamblin was forced into the freezing outdoors. Then he heard a gentle voice.

“Say, Marine, why don’t you come in where it’s warm?”

An elderly black janitor held open a back door into the airport. Shaken, demoralized, and grateful beyond words, Dick sat speechless as the man waited with him, filling the silence with stories about his own family.

“When I got home, I was so upset that I threw my uniform in a corner, dressed as a civilian, and grew my hair.” He had to make a sixty-day return to California to finish his service, but then he came home for good. He visited a lot of people—old friends and neighbors who didn’t know what to say.

“They asked stupid questions, like ‘Did you kill anybody?’ So I learned not to talk about things.” Before long, he returned to work on the family dairy farm.

Meanwhile, outside of Pittsburgh, Bobby Cranmer wondered what had happened to the pen pal he had so revered.

See *Pen Pals* on page 12

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*Pen Pals* continued from page 11

Bob Cranmer did end up following in his dad’s footsteps, taking a commission in the Army after graduating from Duquesne University. He served nine years of active duty and four in the reserves before leaving the military for civilian life. After working for Bell Laboratories in New Jersey for a time, he became involved in the local politics of his hometown, eventually serving as the commissioner of Allegheny County. Today, he runs a consulting firm. About twenty years ago, he came across the first letter he received from Dick Hamblin, written on Marine Corps stationary. It has since been framed and hung in his offices.

Bob tried to locate Dick over the years, searching through phone directories and then the Internet. When his wife got out the Christmas decorations last year, she also uncovered a box of pictures that had hung on Bob’s County Commissioners office wall, including the letter from Dick that Bob had framed. He doubled down online and found Dick’s name listed in the *Wellsboro Gazette* for his fiftieth high school reunion, along with his new town of Romney, West Virginia. It was enough to lead Bob to the cell phone number of Dick Hamblin’s wife.

“I was flabbergasted,” Dick says, after he made the connection between the caller and the kid from long ago.

The two men arranged to meet at Dick Hamblin’s West Virginia house on January 21, 2017, as Bob and his wife drove home from Donald Trump’s inauguration. Almost fifty years to the day after Hamblin penned his first letter (January 23, 1967), Bob Cranmer learned why he hadn’t heard from Dick Hamblin after his service: his duffle bag had been lost in transit from Da Nang to Elmira, and with it all of his letters and personal belongings.

The two men spent hours sharing their personal and professional stories. Bob told Dick about his own military service, and his reason for leaving the Army when he did: one of his brothers had died tragically, and he wanted to be closer to his parents in their grief. He told him that his parents were deceased, and his last remaining sibling, another brother, had recently passed away. He told them about his three children, and that his son David, a Marine who had sustained a back injury in Iraq, had committed suicide after becoming addicted to painkillers prescribed by the VA.

Dick Hamblin listened. He told Bob about his war experience, and Bob recognized a connection between his son and his childhood hero—both proud Marines whose service “had wounded their lives in different ways.”

Since their meeting last January, Bob Cranmer says the two men keep in regular contact. “He and I have a real nice connection.” Dick Hamblin told a friend that Bob Cranmer’s phone call was “the best Christmas present I could have received.” When he learned that his younger pen pal still had the Vietnamese money he had sent him, he pulled from a box of military memorabilia.

“Here’s some more.”

He also gave Bob his medals. “I felt I owed him something,” says Dick. “He is my hero. That any kid ten years old back in those days would care...it stole my heart.”

Inspired and haunted by true stories, Keystone Award-winning writer Carrie Hagen is the author of *We Is Got Him: The Kidnapping that Changed America*. She lives in Philadelphia.