

Military Month: U.S. Marine Sgt. Jack Shaffer

By Carolyn Cloyd
“Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed.
This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children. This is not a way of life at all, in any true sense. Under the cloud of threatening war, it is humanity hanging from a cross of iron.”
- Dwight D. Eisenhower

Listed under the Commander’s Narrative Summary of Significant Events in the declassified Command Chronology report for the First Armored Amphibian Company, 11th Marines, 1st Marine Division (REIN) FMF for December 1 to December 31, 1966, is this short statement:

“A premature burst of a 105mm round occurred at 0510, 29 December 1966 at the 1st platoon position at the mouth of the Cua Viet River (YD348696) resulting in 3 KIA and 2 WIA (evac) from this Company.”

The incident described in the brief reference, listed as “misadventure” on the casualty reports, but more commonly known as friendly fire, ultimately claimed the lives of five Marines and wounded several others. Killed in the incident were 18-year-old Lcpl. Thomas Cardiff Jr. of Pennsylvania, 21-year old Pfc. James Renz of Des Plaines, 18-year-old Dennis Schlott of Baltimore, Md., 20-year-old Pfc. Terry Gemas of Los Angeles, Ca., and 25-year-old Sgt. Jack Shaffer of Arcola.

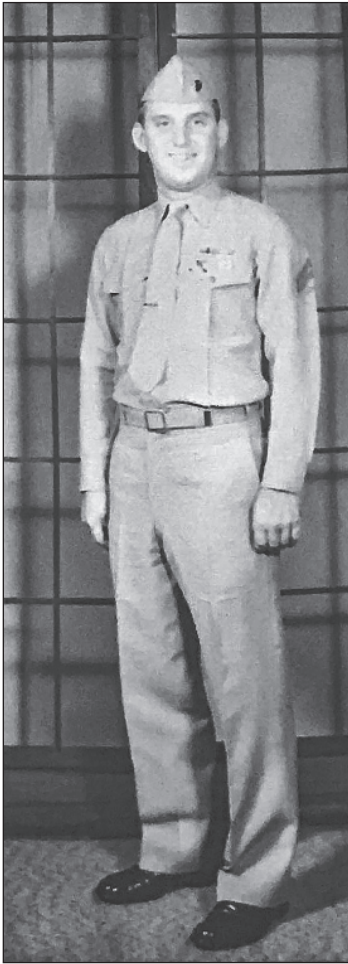
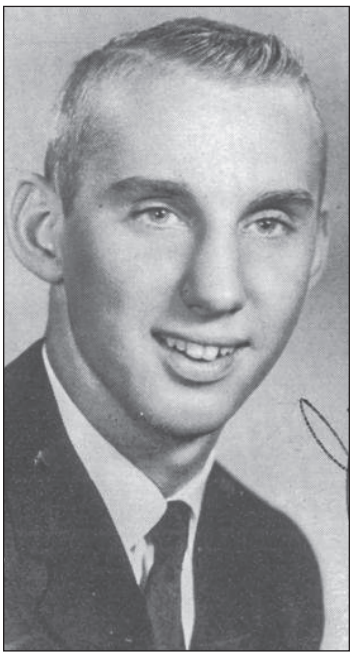
Early on that morning of December 29, 1966, on the United States and Army of the Republic of Vietnam military base in central Vietnam called Camp Kistler or Cửa Việt Base (due to its location on the mouth of the Cửa Việt River where it empties into the South China Sea in the Quảng Trị Province) an artillery mission of harassing fire, a standard practice of random bursts of artillery or small arms meant to create a nuisance and undermine enemy morale by keeping them on a constant state of alert and increasing stress levels by disturbing their sleep and their movements, had been underway against enemy forces.

According to GySgt. William S. Williams, a 30-year Marine Corps veteran who served in the same artillery unit, the harassing fire went on 24-hours a day.

Williams said that on the morning of Dec. 29, 1966, at 5:10, a short round hit an antenna and exploded over the compound. Marine Sgt. Jack Shaffer had just gone on duty as sergeant of the guard when the explosion took place.

“[Jack Shaffer] was on guard duty,” said Williams. “He had just taken my place, if he hadn’t of taken my place I would have been there.”

The round was fired from



TOP LEFT, Jack Shaffer, Arcola High School, 1960. Top right, U.S. Marine Jack Shaffer, ca. 1965. Bottom, Jack Leon Shaffer as a member of the Arcola High School football team his senior year, 1959.



a 105mm howitzer (Shaffer’s DD1300, a report of casualty, lists it as 155mm) mounted on top of a Marine amtrac amphibious vehicle which may not have been properly elevated, causing a low trajectory which allowed the projectile to hit the antenna. Three Marines sleeping on cots in a general purpose tent (Lcpl. Cardiff, Pfc. Renz, and Cpl. Schlott) and two on duty outside the tent (Pfc. Gemas and Sgt. Shaffer) were killed.

Jack Leon Shaffer was born in Arcola on March 26, 1941, but little else is known about his earliest years. At about the age of 15, Jack attended school in Ogden where he belonged to the baseball team and Future Farmers of America. He soon moved to Arcola to live with his foster parents, Robert and Lois King.

Jack attended most of his high school years at Arcola High School, his classmates remember him joining their class around their freshman year. Jack was a member of the AHS football team and the Industrial Arts Club and graduated with the Class of 1960.

Jack’s classmates remem-

ber Jack as a fun-loving, happy-go-lucky guy, and that he was close friends with classmates Paul McNary Jr. and Harry Bright. Classmate Robert Coombe remembers that he liked to ride around in cars and that he was outgoing.

Classmate Larry Finn recalled, “Jack was a little bit of a character. He did his share of what young men do at the age of 16-17-18-19.”

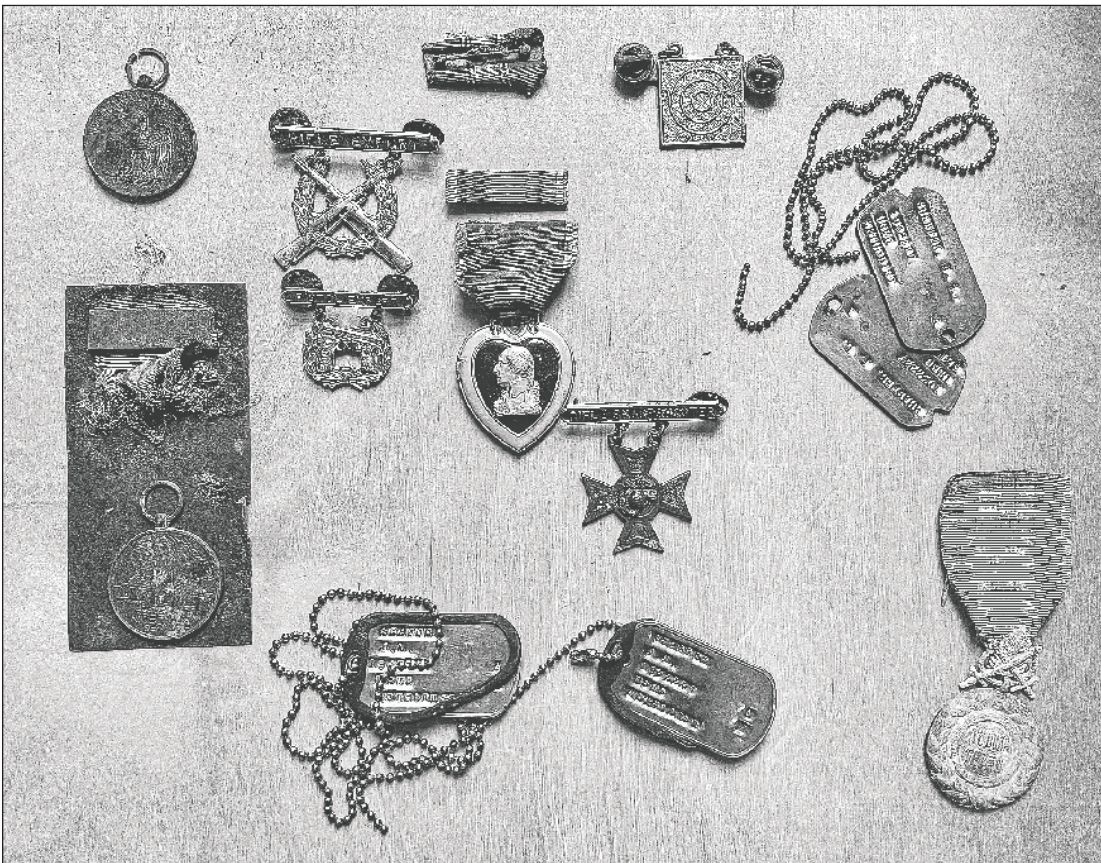
Finn also remembered Jack had a way with some of the girls, and although he was somewhat of a character, it was nothing bad or too ornery, and that Jack was a pretty straight shooter.

Joe Monahan shared some collective thoughts from the Class of 1960 about their classmate Jack Shaffer. He said Jack was well-liked, he was an average student, he played football, and that he never wanted to be a doctor or a businessman, he always wanted to be a soldier.

Jack voluntarily enlisted in the United States Marine Corps in Aug. 1960, shortly after his high school graduation.

In Aug. 1966, Joe Monahan crossed paths with Jack playing golf with his mother, Lois King, and they stopped to chat. Knowing Jack had already served one tour of duty in Vietnam, he asked him if he was done with the service and Jack told him no. Jack told him that he was needed and that he had to be there to help out. His mother overheard the comment and told him that he wasn’t going back, that he had done his duty. But according to Joe Monahan, Jack Shaffer was a very patriotic person, and he wanted to do all he could do. He wished Jack well. It was the last time he ever saw him.

“He didn’t have to go back,” said Monahan. “In the years since, I have come to appreciate the fact that he did it on a voluntary basis. He was a sol-



SGT. JACK SHAFFER’S medal retrieved from the memorial wall that once marked the Jack Shaffer Memorial Pool at Moore Park in Arcola. The capsule containing the medals was not properly sealed and his medals have deteriorated.

dier, you know, the war was on and he felt he was needed there and that’s where he could contribute, and he did.”

Monahan also remarked on how much character Jack’s actions showed. “He did that of his own volition when he went back, when others wouldn’t go.”

At the time of his death, Sgt. Jack Shaffer was serving as an assault amphibious vehicle crewman with the 1st Platoon, First Armored Amphibian Company, 1st Field Artillery Group, 11th Marines, 1st Marine Division, III Marine Amphibious Force. He is remembered by James Capuano, who served with Shaffer and was injured in the incident on Dec. 29, 1966.

“I only knew Sgt. Shaffer for six months but all of the time that I did know him he was an excellent Marine and a very good man,” said Capuano. “His family should be very proud of him. I was only a Pfc. and he was one of my sergeants. He taught me everything he knew about the amtrac and treated me and everyone else as equals, no matter what rank they had achieved.”

Capuano received shrapnel wounds to his head and right arm and was unconscious when he was evacuated to a hospital in Da Nang and did not find out about Shaffer’s death until his platoon commander told him a few days later, something he said was very depressing.

“Such a good man,” said Capuano. “And now he is in Jesus’ hands forever. But knowing our sergeant, he’s teaching them all the United States Marine Corps way of doing things.”

Devastated by the death of their son, Robert and Lois King, presented a generous donation to the City of Arcola which was used to create the Jack Shaffer Memorial Pool at Moore Park in Arcola. The pool no longer exists, but a wall that was built the at the entrance to the pool honoring Jack Shaffer, which included the Eisenhower quote above, still graced the site until recently. The Kings, who had no other children, created the Jack Shaffer Educational Fund with their estate to provide college scholarships for Arcola High School graduates.

Sgt. Jack Shaffer was buried in the National Memorial Cem-

etry of the Pacific at Honolulu, Hawaii. But he is not forgotten. His classmate Robert Coombe and his wife felt compelled to visit his grave while visiting Honolulu and GySgt. Williams said he has visited his grave several times. Both Williams and James Capuano say they particularly remember him each year on the anniversary.

A capsule containing Sgt. Shaffer’s medals which had been encapsulated within the wall at the entrance of the Jack Shaffer Memorial Pool that his parents built in his memory was retrieved when the wall was taken down. The capsule was not properly sealed and his medals have deteriorated. The medals and his grave are all that remain of Sgt. Jack Shaffer, a young man who so wanted to serve his country,

except his memory. Let us carry that memory forward.

In 1999, Congress designated the month of May as Military Appreciation Month. The month, which culminates in Memorial Day, a day in which we honor our military members who have died in service, is meant to honor the sacrifices made by all of the men and women who have served. Yet, when trying to express gratitude to veterans who have experienced combat, we so often hear the same response – “I was just one of the lucky ones, I came home. The ones who never made it back, they are the heroes.” And so, in honor of all of our service members who served in Vietnam, we tell the story of one of their own, one of their heroes who never made it back. And in doing so, we hope to honor them all.



U.S. MARINE Sgt. Jack Shaffer’s grave at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific at Honolulu, Hawaii..



A PLAQUE that once marked a wall at the entrance to the Jack Shaffer Memorial Pool at Moore Park, the wall included a plaque with a quote by Eisenhower and within the wall was embedded a capsule containing Jack Shaffer’s military medals.

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