

Foxhole Promises Made Good

How Serving in Vietnam Led to Lives of Public Service

The following is an excerpt. For the complete story go to <https://usat.ly/foxholes>

The writer, Shelley Lyford, is the daughter of Doug Lyford and President and Chief Executive Officer of West Health, founded by philanthropists Gary and Mary West. West Health is a family of nonprofit organizations dedicated to lowering the cost of healthcare and enabling seniors to successfully age in place with access to high-quality, affordable healthcare and supportive services.

The two most important men in my life—my father, Doug Lyford, a beloved high school teacher; and my longtime boss and mentor, successful businessman and philanthropist Gary West—both answered the call of duty and served in Vietnam back in 1968. While they never met there, they shared an experience that would shape their lives and legacies.



The author's father, Doug Lyford, in 1968. Credit: Doug Lyford

COMING TO LIGHT

As the 50th anniversary of the Tet Offensive neared last year, I sat down with each of them to ask about their “war stories.” While I am close with my father, his time overseas remained a mysterious black hole in his life story. The same was true for Gary, whom I have known for more than 12 years while leading his foundation and helping him shape his philanthropic legacy. As we talked, these two 71-year-old men seemed to transform back into the 21-year-old boys who were plucked from the safety and comfort of rural America and dropped into a tropical jungle half a world away where danger lurked at every turn.

My father's draft notice arrived five days after he graduated from Vermont Technical College. He didn't want to go to war, but as a brash young man, he wasn't scared of it either, at least not at first.

“I thought I could take on the world,” he said. “That changed the day my father came to say goodbye to me at Fort Dix after basic training. It's hard to walk away from your father knowing you might not return. I felt pretty small when I got on that plane to Vietnam.”

At about the same time, Gary joined a transportation unit in Omaha, Neb., that ended up deploying to Vietnam. He was dating a woman named Mary and learned that if they married they would receive \$100 a month more, and a \$25,000 death benefit if he were killed in combat. They wed a few weeks before he shipped out.

“THINGS GOT REAL IN A HURRY”

It didn't take long for terror to strike.

“When our transport plane was landing outside of Saigon, it looked so green and peaceful, I thought, ‘Oh hell, this is going to be a piece of cake,’” my father said. “That first night a rocket hit some of the barracks with the new recruits. I could hear people hollering ‘Medic!’ Things got real in a hurry.”

Meanwhile, Gary was based at Cam Ranh Bay, unloading material from ships. One week a month, his unit drove a convoy to resupply troops in the field. Gary rode in the back of a jeep, clutching a mounted machine gun pointed into the dense jungle.



Gary West, in an undated photo, served in Vietnam at the same time as the author's father, Doug Lyford. Credit: Gary West

“You couldn't see 10 feet off the road in either direction,” he said. “Come nightfall, we would circle the wagons in an encampment. If there was a bright moon, you could sleep pretty soundly. If it was a moonless night or cloudy, you better be on guard. That's when the firefights happened.”

Stationed farther south, my father's unit rebuilt villages the Viet Cong (VC) had destroyed. “We were constantly on the lookout for trip wires. I followed one to an open well where it was wired to a 500-pound bomb that hadn't detonated.”

Dad's voice broke as he spoke. “Bad things happened in those villages. I can still see bodies floating down the river with their hands wired together by the VC.”

“Night was the worst,” he said. “I feel like I never slept in Vietnam. When you were set up on a perimeter at night, you had an M60 machine gun. You had your Claymores out and hand grenades. The VC would charge our bunker line with dynamite on their backs.”

Gary also spoke to the fear of an enemy you rarely saw in daylight, and the mortal reckoning that ensued. “When the shooting or mortars started, you didn't know if there were five or 500 people out there. On more than one night I said, ‘God, if You get me through this, I promise You someday I'll do something really good for the world.’”

My father made a similar pledge during a nighttime firefight. “In Cu Chi in February 1969, we were pretty much overrun. We knew something was going on because the 101st Air Cavalry was coming down and supporting us. They set up their perimeters really late at night, and we said to ourselves, ‘This is not going to be good.’”

He paused, then confessed, “Shelley, you're the first I've ever told this to. The guys right in front of me were killed. The NVA [North Vietnamese Army] launched their rockets right up to where we were. The next rocket—I can still see it—would have cleaned us out. I made my peace with God that night. I said, ‘If You let me come home, I will work to leave this earth better than it was when I got here.’”

HOMECOMING

Finally, their tours ended. My dad was so determined to leave the war behind him that he threw his duffle bag with all his gear in a dump in Vietnam.

Everybody wanted to forget.

“Even my family never asked what went on in Vietnam,” my father recalled. “My parents just wanted to put it behind them. They were just so happy I came home alive, they didn't even want to talk about it.”

For my father and other returning veterans, the trauma endured. “The psychological injuries were the worst. A lot of guys survived the war but couldn't survive the memories. It didn't help that Vietnam veterans were so disliked. Many of the vets who fought for our country committed suicide or drank themselves to death because they had nowhere to turn.”

My father vowed to resist that fate. “I figured that since I survived, somebody wanted me to do something in this world.”

To climb out of the fog of war, he kept busy working at his family's dairy farm and at a machine shop. “Then I met your mom,” he said, “and she kept me occupied for 24 hours a day.”

Dad went back to school and earned an education degree and began teaching high school math and industrial arts. But he was much more than a teacher. He took troubled and less fortunate kids under his wing, providing support and guidance on life's challenges - and many a warm meal at our family dinner table. For decades, he also devoted himself to helping veterans and Gold Star families.

Gary, too, honored his foxhole promise, but in a different way. He worked hard for 40 years alongside his wife, Mary, building a business that eventually employed 30,000 people. “I felt my contribution to society was creating tens of thousands of jobs,” he said. “I knew those jobs were helping thousands of families.”

In 2006, when Gary and Mary sold their controlling interest in their business, West Corporation, they became billionaires. They could have bought a football team or a tropical island and never worked another day.

“But I kept thinking of those nights in Vietnam when I told God that if He got me out of there, I would do something good for the world,” Gary said. “I knew I could do more.”

“It was living with fear that taught me what poor people endure,” he said. “I have empathy for people living in housing projects or on the streets. For them, every day is like a day I experienced in Vietnam. A lot of people right here in the USA live in fear for their lives. Fear of gang violence, or fear of an illness they can't afford to treat, or fear of being abandoned in old age with nowhere to live.”

“It's simply intolerable to me that the richest country in the world can't provide for the basic health needs of its most vulnerable citizens due to our grossly overpriced healthcare system.”

“Runaway healthcare costs are consuming our country's wealth to the point we can't properly educate our children, care for our seniors, improve our infrastructure, keep our military strong or properly defend our borders,” he said.

Gary turned his compassion and his outrage into action. He and Mary pledged their entire fortune to the mission of ensuring all Americans—especially seniors, veterans and the poor—have access to the affordable,

high-quality healthcare they deserve. They established West Health—a family of nonprofit organizations including a medical research institute, a healthcare policy center, and a foundation that has already awarded hundreds of millions of dollars in grants to lowering costs and transforming our healthcare system.



Shelley Lyford with Gary and Mary West in December 2018. Credit: Shelley Lyford

Gary's legacy of service will endure not only because of his financial largess, but because he has been such an inspiration to so many people - including me. He has shown me that compassion is the renewable life force that multiplies the power of good works. He's taught me not to play “small-ball” when it comes to social change. Begin locally, but when you find a solution to a problem, don't hesitate to scale it up to help as many people as possible.



The author and her father, Doug Lyford, on a recent fishing trip. Credit: Shelley Lyford

I'm grateful for the wisdom Gary and my father have shared with me over the years. I'm even more grateful for the love, humanitarianism and examples they've set for social responsibility in life and work.

They arrived in Vietnam as boys and returned as men, battered and bruised, but with an altruism forged in the crucible of combat. They went on to heal their communities and make good on their foxhole promises.

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Learn more about Gary and Mary West's philanthropic efforts to lower healthcare costs and improve care for seniors at westhealth.org

By Shelley Lyford for West Health