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Caption: After graduating from college in Kansas, Jim Dyer, center, joined the Navy and was sent to Vietnam as an adviser in 1963-64, sailing armed junks to disrupt enemy supply lines. In 1964 he began a second tour of duty as a Marine artillery officer. He returned again in 1971 for a third tour. PHOTOS COURTESY OF COLORADO HISTORICAL SOCIETY
CAPTION: Jim Dyer, pictured in Vietnam, at left and recently above, is writing about his life, including his three tours of duty in Southeast Asia, for the benefit of his family.

JIM DYER'S LIFE OF 'WONDERS'

Source: John J. Sanko, Rocky Mountain News

Public Utilities Commissioner Jim Dyer is spending his evenings reading old letters - the ones he sent to his parents decades ago when he was a young officer in Vietnam.

He's using the letters to help write about his three tours of duty in the Southeast Asian conflict. He served as an adviser to the South Vietnamese and South Korean forces and also commanded a U.S. Marine field artillery unit. He got the idea for a book from his own "fighting" ancestors.

"My great-grandfather, Henry Dyer, wrote a pamphlet, basically about his experiences in the Civil War," Dyer explained. "His father, Lewis Dyer, was a surgeon in the 81st Illinois. My great-grandfather was his aide.

"Down in Louisiana, they liberated a barrel of rum and my great-granddad, he wrote about it and said, 'My, but it was fiery.' "

Dyer laughs as he talks about the liberated keg of rum, but said it "gave me a window into his being through that, and I couldn't help but think how glad I was that he had written about his experiences."

"I thought, 'I've done a few things in my life. So I'm writing it down.'"

"I'm about halfway through the first of my three tours in Vietnam, when I was still in the Navy and sailing junks in the South China Sea."

But the book isn't just about Vietnam. It will cover growing up in Kansas, becoming a Colorado lawmaker from Durango and his appointment to the PUC.

Dyer, who will be 66 on Dec. 9, isn't under any illusion his book will be a best-seller. He's doing it so his family - he has three grown sons - will know what he has done during his life.

He knows his military experiences will be far more interesting than any "combat" he might have had as a legislator.

Following graduation from Benedictine College in Atchison, Kan., Dyer enlisted in the Navy and in 1963 served as an adviser to the South Vietnamese, sailing armed junks to interrupt enemy supplies.

His first tour was in 1963 and 1964 in the Mekong Delta as a Navy lieutenant. He then switched to the Marine Corps and returned in 1966 and 1967 to command a Marine howitzer battery. And in 1971-72 he returned again, this time assigned with Korean Marines to provide U.S. Naval fire and air support.

He received several medals, including awards from both South Vietnam and South Korea. He once jumped from a hovering helicopter into the South China Sea to help rescue a downed Army pilot.

He never was wounded but does bear a mark from his days in conflict - a tattoo over his heart that he was given as a "reward" for his service with the South Vietnamese.

"I never learned to speak Korean very well, but I got pretty good at Vietnamese," he explains. "You know, if you go out three weeks and don't see an American, you get good (at speaking Vietnamese) or starve."

Because of that initial experience, tattooed over his heart are the words "SAT CONG," which means "Death to the Viet Cong." He insists he got it "in broad daylight and when I was cold sober."

It had another meaning, too, he said.

"It was a death wish in a way, because if you got captured, they weren't very gentle," he explained. "The idea was if you had this tattoo, you would fight to the death. I thought, well, I've got one week to go. No big deal. Then I had two more years there."

Prior to his second tour of duty, Dyer met his future bride, Shari, at a Marine Corps reception at Camp Pendleton, Calif., in 1965. Her dad was a Marine for 32 years, and she was a flight attendant for TWA.

They had four dates before he returned to Vietnam. They corresponded.

Then, a "good-sized" battle near the demilitarized zone in October 1966 gave him an

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epiphany.

"After 40 days on line up there, I got to a rear radio and said (to Shari), 'Meet me in Hawaii and let's get married,'" Dyer said. "So we basically eloped."

She currently heads the victims' assistance unit in Durango's 6th Judicial District.

In addition to his memories of Vietnam, Dyer will include "the wonders of being in the Colorado state legislature." Dyer was elected to the House in 1986, and also served in the Senate, until he was appointed to the PUC in 2001.

He's even going back six generations in his writing to mention William and Mary Dyer, who came over from England to Rhode Island. She converted to Quakerism, went up to Boston and "pestered the Puritans to the point that on June 1, 1660, they hung her - as a non-Puritan."

He and a current state senator who has the same name - Republican Jim Dyer from Arapahoe County - share Mary Dyer as a common ancestor.

The current senator "wrote a nasty letter to Massachusetts complaining that by hanging her, we obviously didn't get good guidance because both of us ended up in politics," Dyer said.

"They wrote back saying (they) put up a real nice statue of her on Statehouse grounds - and they have."

INFOBOX

A window on war

Excerpts from Jim Dyer's letters to his parents when he was a Navy adviser in Vietnam.

* Sept. 3, 1963

My head is shaven again! I am pretty sure I will get the job I want - junks! The last four days I have been on a tour of three of the six bases I'll be responsible for. Slept in a grass hut one night and old French planters' chateaus the other nights.

* Sept. 21, 1963

Mom, after eating some nameless meat dipped in fermented fish oil, I'll never never comment on your fry-cooking again . . . I'm gaining weight again anyway. I'm healthy, happy and homesick.

* Nov. 13, 1963

The Viet Cong have stepped up their activity considerably last week. Division 33 is the last government-held post in Go Kong District. They occupy the town only 300 yards from the post. The people have left their town, so we are blasting it with air strikes. I was over there Monday in a helo. It was a little hot.

* Nov. 23, 1963

Heard the news about Pres. Kennedy 6:30 this morning. We are all shocked. Please send me the Newsweek issue covering the event. We get Time very quickly. It seems almost personal. Even the Vietnamese were taken back.

The V.C. have stepped up their pace, but so have we. There will not be any easy solution, but I personally think we are doing well. Our big mistake here seems to me to be our timetable. It is too accelerated.

Sure do get homesick when I hear about pro football, dinner in Leavenworth, cold beer . . .

* Nov. 30, 1963

The numbness of JFK's slaying has worn off, although I still can't believe it. All the Vietnamese flew their flags at half-mast. We had an official day of mourning. I just figured it out. Making Lieut. pay, with subsistence pay, combat pay and cost-of-living allowance, I'm finally making more than I did on construction.

* Dec. 28, 1963

We seem to be doing better with the Viet Cong. Captured some, got much intelligence info. They are poor, ragged sad-eyed little guys - sad-eyed because I've got the gun. Ate rat dipped in fermented fish oil the other day. Tasty.

* Jan. 2, 1964

We lost one and had one wounded. I called for a helo evacuation of the man through official channels. I think he will make it. His pulse was weak and he couldn't talk, but I looked him in the eye and held his hand the whole helo trip, and he wasn't giving up. That is how they are. I am proud to be among them - not above or superior, but among. We like each other.

* Jan. 26, 1964

Just returned home from Div. 33. Had that great old Vietnamese staple last night . . . dog. Actually I'm starting to like it. I like dirty boots and a day-old beard. I guess I'd better be a Marine.

* Feb. 5, 1964

Pretty hard to follow events here. We are moving better militarily, more and bigger operations, but it just doesn't feel like a winner. We are tired, but the job remains. The Vietnamese have their big holiday season coming up. Called TET, it is the lunar new year. The V.C. even quit raising hell for a week. I guess after being at war since 1940, they figure that everybody needs to take a break.

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