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Nail32: John Van Etten part of Air Force's rich history

Recent Rotary Club of Petoskey inductee John Van Etten part of Air Force's rich history by Steve Foley(231) 439-9397 spfoley@petoskeynews.com Mar 8, 2017

CHARLEVOIX — John Van Etten's first recollection of seeing an airplane came when he was at the tender age of 2 on his parents' farm in Terra Haute, Ind.

"Someone had landed a Piper J-3 Cub in the field across from our barn," Van Etten said. "Somewhere there's a picture of me sitting at the base of the tail."

Growing up, Van Etten would make models of planes in school and dabble with radio-controlled planes in his basement.

Little did the now 70-year-old Van Etten know that some 20 years later he'd be involved in the United States Air Force's most famous, largest, longest and most complex search-and-rescue operations during the Vietnam War.

Van Etten, who lives near Horton Bay overlooking scenic Lake Charlevoix, originally was an air controller during his tour in Vietnam, but after six months was designated as an on-scene commander for search-and-rescue missions.

"That was really quite a thing," Van Etten said. "It means you're in charge of the entire rescue mission. I had not really planned on doing it, I had 365 days there and I was looking to get out."

Of many search-and-rescue missions he performed, Bat 21 Bravo, or the rescue of U.S. Air Force navigator Icaal "Gene" Hambleton, turned into a large rescue operation for one man after his plane was shot down behind enemy lines during Vietnam.

Hambleton, whose harrowing tale has been chronicled in a pair of books and was the basis of the 1988 movie "Bat 21" starring Gene Hackman, was on his 63rd combat mission over Vietnam when his EB-66, an unarmed electronic jamming aircraft, was hit by a surface-to-air missile at 30,000 feet on April 2, 1972.

The only member of the six-man crew able to eject, the then 53-year-old navigator spent the next 11 days evading capture. He parachuted into the Quang Tri province, just south of the

demilitarized zone separating North and South Vietnam, which at the time was an extremely dangerous region.

It was a region Van Etten would eventually find himself at.

"My call sign the whole time I was there was Nail32, and anybody that had a call sign with Nail told you what base and what type of airplane they were flying," Van Etten said. "I had a Falcon, F-4, out of Da Nang."

Van Etten said every time a commander flew a mission, all information of the mission had to be written down.

"You have so much data, you can't put your head down and write it down because someone is always shooting at you," Van Etten said. "I had a grease pencil and I had plexiglass that went all around the cockpit. Well, after about 4 1/2 hours, you couldn't even see."

Van Etten decided he would wire a tape recorder into his headset so anything that went into his headphones would be on tape.

"The first mission I tried that was Bat 21," Van Etten said. "It was a 40-minute flight from my base to where the rescue was. I was about 20 miles out from the area of the rescue and an A1E Skyraider was trying to bring in these helicopters to try to pick him (Hambleton) up.

"Well the Vietnamese had gotten pretty smart," Van Etten said. "They wouldn't shoot until you got in really close. As soon as they passed the Cam Lo River, they opened up on the helicopter, a big H53, and shot him down."

Six crewmen were killed during the rescue attempt. Also during rescue operations, a forward air controller aircraft was shot down and both men bailed out. The pilot was captured, but 1st Lt. Mark Clark, the backseat observer, was in need of rescue, as well.

"The helicopter went down within 300 yards of where Hambleton was," Van Etten said. "The on-scene commander was pretty shook up and took his crew and left. I was the next guy on scene and we had two guys on the ground, Hambleton and Clark."

Van Etten said the first thing he did was call Gene, who kept in touch with U.S. forces with his emergency radio, and tell him he was the next on-scene commander.

"He was just about ready to give up," Van Etten said. "He didn't want any more people killed and they (U.S. Forces) really didn't want him to become a prisoner of war because he'd never make it. He knew too much and they would've shipped him to Moscow."

Van Etten said he doesn't exactly recall what he told Hambleton over the radio, but he did talk to him "G-rated" about people being killed in attempts to rescuing him and it'd be a waste if he stood up and was taken prisoner.

"I talked to him about it and he made his decision there he was going to get out if he could," Van Etten said. "He was on the ground for nine days before we got out. I had never met him."

The Air Force did whatever it took to rescue Hambleton and the direct and indirect cost of rescuing Hambleton was enormous.

The events became a watershed event in Air Force search and rescue and to prevent friendly fire incidents, the U.S. imposed a standard no-fire zone within a 17 mile radius of Hambleton and diverted aircraft to aid in his rescue.

It was decided that Navy SEAL Lt. Thomas Norris and a small team would infiltrate enemy lines and attempt to pick up Hambleton and Clark at the nearby Cam Lo River.

Rescue planners discovered in conversation with Hambleton he was one of the best golfers in the Air Force and had a vivid memory of the courses he played. A plan was derived to guide him to the river via a series of specific golf course holes he had played.

More than a week into the rescue and suffering from near starvation and dehydration, Hambleton was told to play hole No. 4 at Corona de Tucson, which is a short par 3, where he'd find a refreshment stand, but was ordered he'd have to tap his own keg.

That "fairway" led him to a banana tree grove, where he was able to cut a hole in the trunks and drink the water that flows up trunks in the morning and runs down to the ground at night.

Once he reached the river, Hambleton told Golf Digest in an interview, "It was three days and three nights in the water and on the bank under thick trees. Then I saw this sampan with two men. A Vietnamese in front carried an AK-47 and I thought, 'This is it.' But the other guys dressed like a Vietnamese fisherman had these big, round, American eyes" — or those of Norris.

Norris, who days earlier picked up Clark at the river, earned the Medal of Honor for his actions during the rescue mission, while Van Etten received the Distinguished Flying Cross for his part in the rescue.

"Hambleton was interviewed in a story for Air War College and he said he didn't know who I was," Van Etten said. "But in the interview he referred to me as the 'Preacher FAC' because I had convinced him to not give up."

Van Etten said it was "too hot" for him to do much of anything at the time of his Bat 21 mission.

"I couldn't bring in any helicopter to help him get out," Van Etten said. "It was so bad that 7th Air Force said no more airplanes go in there. There were 30,000 North Vietnamese grouping right there, and we were right in the middle of it."

Van Etten said the only bad taste he still has in his mouth is with "intel," or intelligence.

"They didn't tell us anything about it," Van Etten said. "There were 30,000 North Vietnamese right there. We just came into a beehive and didn't know it was there. A lot of people got nailed."

Van Etten said several years ago, and just before Hambleton passed away in 2004, he was part of a symposium at Nellis Air Force Base in Las Vegas.

"It's like fighter pilot mecca and you can't miss Hambleton, I've seen his photo," Van Etten said. "I reached out my hand and introduced myself and said my name is John Van Etten. He said, 'No, you're Nail32, I'd recognize that voice anywhere.'"

Van Etten said during his tour from July 1971 to July 1972, he flew in 198 combat missions.

"The last half of my tour was almost all search-and-rescue," Van Etten said. "Some were pretty wild and crazy, but the only reason Bat 21 was really famous was because it was such a disaster. Most rescues, like the one for my roommate, came off like clockwork, but some were crazy."

Van Etten recently told his Bat 21 Bravo tale at a Rotary Club of Petoskey function at Stafford's Perry Hotel, and in February became a member of the club.

"I looked at a lot of clubs to join in Terra Haute and I've been going to that (Petoskey) club for about a year and half as a visitor," Van Etten said. "I've been looking to join and Bill Collins was my sponsor.

"He's (Collins) a graduate of Rose-Hulman which is in Terra Haute and when I found out he was a graduate I brought him some Rose-Hulman propaganda," Van Etten said. "He said I should join the club."

Van Etten said while at a Rotary luncheon someone asked him some questions about flying and Bat 21 came up.

"Bill suggested I talk to the club about that," Van Etten said.

Van Etten recently sold his coating manufacturing business in Indiana and is in the process of moving items from his Indiana home to his house located on Lake Charlevoix.

For the past 30 years he's been involved with Scientific Medicinal Systems, Inc., where he helps manufacture and sell nutritional products which he now sells online.

"As a child, I used to come to this area every summer," Van Etten said. "My wife (Lynn) and her family had a place on Torch Lake, so this was an area we'd spend time as kids.

"We love it up here," Van Etten said. "Some people whine about the weather, but you can whine about the weather anywhere in the world."