

EAST FISHKILL HOMETOWN HERO

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Jeffrey M. Dunay

By Lauren Fitzgerald



In 1968, along with six friends, 19-year-old Jeffrey M. Dunay graduated from Beacon High School and enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps, embarking on a path that would lead him deep into the heart of the Vietnam War.

Born and raised in Beacon, Jeff was one of seven children in a family rooted in military tradition. His father served as a Marine during World War II, and his oldest brother was a Marine during the Cuban Missile Crisis. "Joining the service gave me a sense of purpose after high school," Jeff reflects.

THE WALKING DEAD

After completing basic training at Parris Island, S.C., Jeff underwent rigorous training at Camp Lejeune, N.C., Camp Pendleton, Calif., and finally Okinawa, Japan, before heading to Vietnam. Serving with the First Battalion, Ninth Marine, Third Division—a unit notoriously nicknamed "The Walking Dead" due to its high casualty rate—Jeff experienced the harsh realities of war firsthand. From enduring long weeks in the rugged terrain of Quảng Trị, with "only the things we could carry," to navigating



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Pictured here during Hudson Valley Honor Flight's Mission 27, Jeff (center) found the experience moving and rewarding.



As DAV Chapter 144 Senior Vice Commander, Jeff (second from right) and his fellow members advocate for the benefits and services veterans deserve.

the ever-present threats of ambushes, trip wires and booby traps, his tenacity and courage were paramount.

The soldiers patrolled and secured the area, eagerly anticipating a helicopter's arrival every three to four days to deliver vital supplies—canned food and drinks that felt like a luxury in their tough surroundings. They returned to a rear safe zone every two weeks for a much-needed regrouping, allowing them to enjoy real food and restful sleep on cots in tents before heading back to the field for their next mission.

FROM VIETNAM, BACK TO BEACON

When Jeff's unit pulled out of Vietnam in 1970, he returned to Okinawa and then to Camp Pendleton, where he was offered a raise in pay and rank in exchange for an additional four years of service. He declined the offer, was honorably discharged and returned to Beacon with the rank of Corporal. Remarkably, his six friends also made it home. While grateful, the 21-year-old faced a challenging transition to civilian life during a time when veterans were often met with indifference and hostility.

Jeff worked on the IBM assembly line in East Fishkill and held various other jobs before joining the Carpenters Union, where he developed his residential and commercial carpentry skills. He married his wife Holly in 1972, and they had two children, Jeffrey and Joyell, settling in Wappingers. Sadly, Holly passed away after a battle with cancer in 1996.

Jeff found love again when he married Marianne in 2003. He embraced her daughters Jeaninne and Lynnell and son Joseph as part of his family, blending their lives and starting a new chapter filled with the love of their ten grandchildren. The couple enjoys the convenience and privacy of the Hopewell Junction home they built in 2005.

VETERANS HELPING VETERANS

Since retiring in 2009, Jeff has been spending his extra time supporting fellow veterans. "It gets me out and involved and keeps me active," he says. Besides being a member of Marine Corps League 861 and the Manny Bacon American Legion Post 1758, he serves as Senior Vice Commander of the Disabled American Veterans (DAV) Chapter 144 at the Castle Point VA Medical Center. He finds joy in planning their meetings, recruiting members, organizing fundraisers, hosting luncheons for the hospital's patients and more. He and his team of DAV leaders and volunteers are

dedicated to helping veterans and their families receive the benefits they need and deserve.

One of Jeff's most rewarding experiences was in 2022 aboard Hudson Valley Honor Flight's Mission 27 to visit the war memorials in Washington, D.C. He describes how the patriotic receptions from the public at both the send-off and return, along with letters of appreciation from friends and family during the in-flight "mail call," were emotional and provided him and his fellow heroes with long-overdue recognition.

The DAV is looking for members. For more information, visit www.dav.org/get-involved or call (845) 831-2000 ext. 215713 or 215714 ♦



Jeff and Marianne married in 2003, blending their lives and families together.