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During 43 years service, Biltoft part of USACE history

By John Connor
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This photo of U.S. Army Sgt. John Biltoft (on left) taken in 1966 in Vietnam is published on page 173 of the 2008 edition of "The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers: A History." On-line at: <http://www.usace.army.mil/publications/eng-pamphlets/ep870-1-68/c-3.pdf>

TALLIL AIR BASE, Iraq – You know you’ve been around for a while when you stumble across a picture of your youthful self in a history book.

John Biltoft, a construction representative with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Gulf Region Division South District, Iraq, had that experience recently when GRS received a shipment of books, "The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers: A History", published by USACE’s Office of History. John was browsing thru the book and there, in the section of the history dealing with the role of Army Engineers in the Vietnam War, was a picture of John and another young Soldier apparently pre-

paring to ignite a charge to blow part of the infamous tunnels of Cu Chi.

John’s immediate reaction to his discovery? "When you’re in a history book, it’s time to retire," he said.

Not quite yet. John and his wife Pat, an administrative officer at GRS, are closing in on their first year anniversary in Iraq.

John knows the time and place that picture was taken—Cu Chi in 1966. The Viet Cong riddled the area, northwest of Saigon, with an elaborate system of tunnels from which they waged war on U.S. forces. He reports that he does not recall the exact circumstances regarding the photo — maybe they were about to blow



John and Pat Biltoft are both assigned to Gulf Region Division South District at Tallil Air Base, Iraq. John is a Construction Representative and Pat is the GRS Human Resources Administrative Officer. [USACE Photo]

some ordinance. In any event, John was an Army engineer on the job at Cu Chi with the 362nd Engineer Company (LE), attached to the 588th Engineer Battalion (CBT), with the mission of building a base camp for the headquarters of the 25th Infantry Division. While in Vietnam, John was involved in many engineering projects similar to the work he is now overseeing as a GRS construction representative — building roads and bridges, water treatment units, and medical facilities.

During his second tour of Vietnam in March of 1970, while serving as a construction supervisor with Company B 554th Engineering Battalion (Const) he was wounded in action, ending his time with the engineers. John was reclassified and served the remainder of his 26-plus years of active duty as a recruiter/career counselor.

John also served in Germany in the 1960's with the 78th Engineer Battalion (CBT). They constructed many civic projects that included sports fields and sewage drainage systems. One project, a soccer field, was still in use when he and Pat visited it while working in Germany in 2007. He believes that recovery in Iraq



Construction Representatives John Morgan (left) and John Biltoft with Gulf Region Division are each overseeing a number of essential service projects improving neighborhoods throughout southern Iraq. Morgan served as a Demolition Specialist with the 101st Airborne in 1967 and then returned for a second tour in 1971 as a combat engineer with the 92nd Engineer Battalion. He retired in 1992 as a First Sergeant with 26 years service. Biltoft served in Vietnam in 1966 as a construction engineer with the 362nd Engineer Company (LE) attached to the 588th Engineer Battalion (CBT) and then returned for a second tour in December 1969 with Company B, 554th Engineer Battalion. He retired as a Master Sergeant in 1991 with 26 years service. Both earned Purple Hearts in Vietnam. (USACE photo by Norris Jones)



Construction Representative John Biltoft with Gulf Region Division and Iraqi civil engineer Alaa discuss the current progress of a \$749,000 water treatment plant being built in northern Dhi Qar Province. (USACE photo by Norris Jones)

can blossom as it did in Germany after that war.

He clearly cherishes the experience, joking that "When I discovered my mother was a civilian, I ran away from home."

When asked what was most impressive after serving 43-plus years with the U.S. Army he said, "I'm most impressed with the more youthful American Citizens that I work with each day, both military and civilian. They are prepared to take over. What a novel idea."

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