

NEWSLETTER

Bender's men say their leader's support in combat unforgettable

By Sarah Kessinger - *The Marysville Advocate*

Kenneth Bender did two tours of Korea and one of Vietnam. In his final years in Southeast Asia, he would become known as "Top Bender" by the combat unit he led as a first sergeant in the central highlands of South Vietnam.

"He was our mother in the jungle," said Don Hiemstra, Delavan, Wis.

Hiemstra served under Bender in the Army's 1st Battalion, 12th Regiment of the 4th Infantry Division in the late 1960s. *(continued page 2)*



At a reunion at the Wagon Wheel Cafe in Marysville, KS this fall, some of the members of the Red Warriors of the 1st Battalion, 12th Infantry Regiment, 4th Infantry Division met as they do every few years with their former unit leader. In back, from left, Steve Hubbard, Adrian, Mo.; Larry Newcomer, Oak grove, Mo.; Donald Hiemstra, Delavan, Wis.; front row, Don Uthe, Winston, Mo.; Florella and Ken Bender, Marysville; and Rich Cremer, Chesterfield, Mo. *Photo by Sarah Kessinger*

"Top" Kenneth Bender

First Sergeant Kenneth Bender served during the 1966/67 time period, both in HHC and in Delta Company. It was his time in the field with members of Delta Company that he gained the admiration of his troops. Members of Delta Company have been visiting their former First Sergeant for a number of years.



Having served two tours in Korea gave Bender a unique advantage when leading and serving the men of Delta Company in Vietnam.



“He cared more about the troops than he did about himself.”

“He took care of all of our basic needs, food, water, bullets, beer, cigarettes...”

Today Bender lives in Marysville (Kansas). He moved her with his wife, Florella, in 2002 from Monroe, Wisconsin, to be near their son, Randy Bender, Marysville.

During this past decade, Hiemstra and a core group of others from Bender’s unit reconnected and began to hold reunions. They now travel from their home states every few years to Kansas to see their former military leader.

This Fall, the men gathered at the Wagon Wheel Cafe in Marysville.

Bender meant a lot to them when they were young soldiers first experiencing war, said Larry Newcomer, Oak Grove, Mo., one of his charges in ‘Nam.

“He was an awesome guy,” Newcomer said. “We loved him to death. He was 36, and I was 20. He was so great to serve under.”

As the go-between for the camp commander and the troops, Bender became known as an advocate for his men on the front lines as they fought through battles and the aftermath.

“He was a great first sergeant,” Said Steve Hubbard, Adrian, Mo. “He cared more about the troops than he did about himself.”

Bender said they all did their jobs as effectively as they could under the circumstances.

“I would have taken a bullet for any one of those guys,” he said. “We fought for the man next to us.”

Also there for the reunion were Don Uthe, Winston, Mo., and Rich Cremer, Chesterfield, Mo.

Cremer recalls the lengths that Bender went to.

He did everything we did, plus, “Cremer said.

Hubbard said the men learned a lot during that year-long tour.

“We learned how to be a good soldier. None of us knew that when we got there,” he said.

The men bonded during their time together in the battalion for their 12-month tour in 1968.

“There’s a feeling between two person from combat that’s closer than anything.” Bender said. “It’s a death-defying situation.”

He said he was happy to be reunited with the men when they have the time to travel now. And he’s glad they still have each other to call when they need to talk.

“No one understands unless they’ve been there.”

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First Sergeant Ken Bender - taking a break in the field with the men of Delta Company 1968



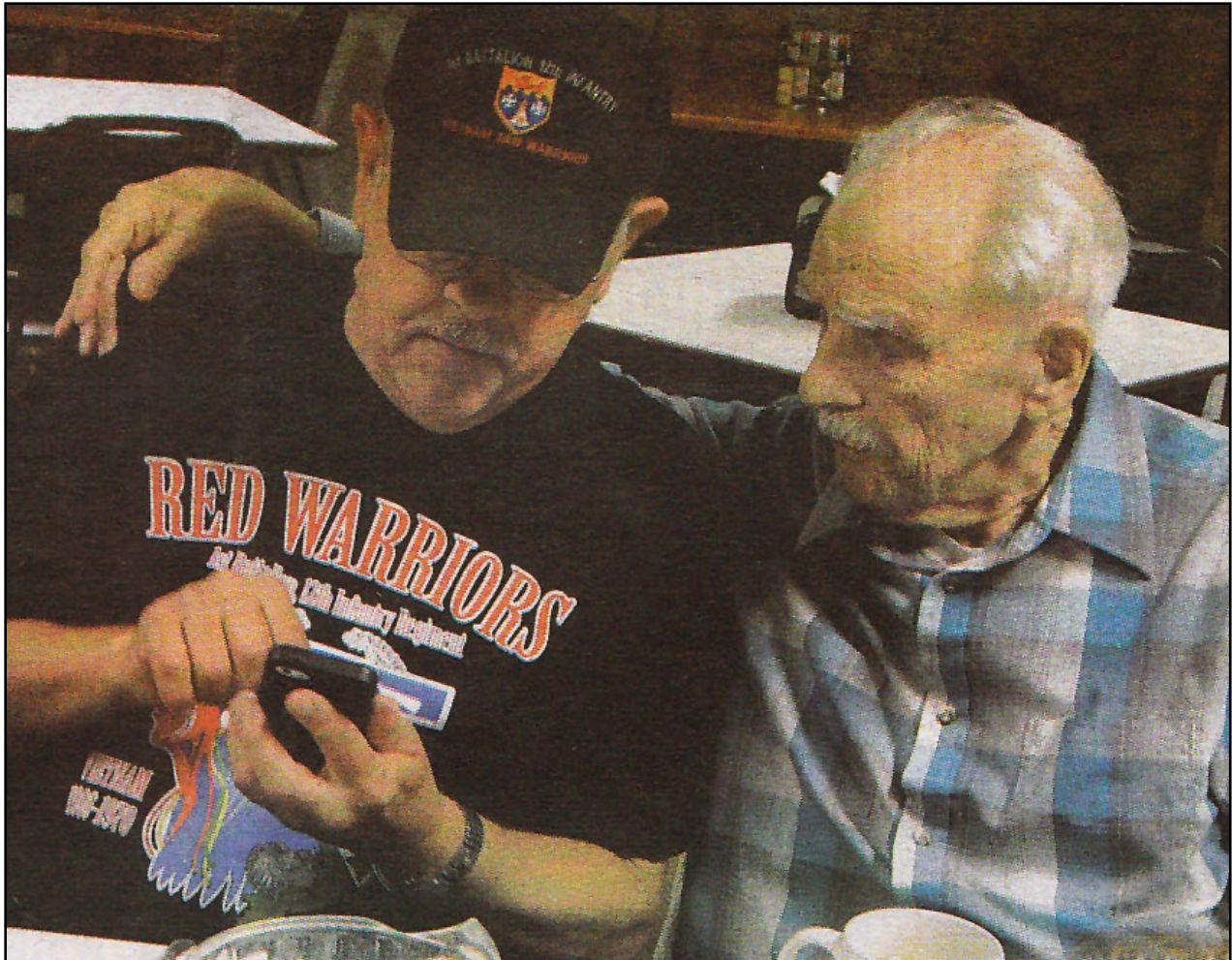
RED WARRIORS

You can visit the Red Warriors on their Association website at www.redwarriors.us

Red Warriors

“Top” Ken Bender

Soldiers visit former 1st Sergeant



Don Hiemstra and his former unit leader in Vietnam, Ken Bender, Marysville, review the website of the Red Warriors, the 1st Battalion, 12th Infantry

Regiment, 4th Infantry Division. The men served together in Vietnam in 1968.

Photo by Sarah Kessinger.

