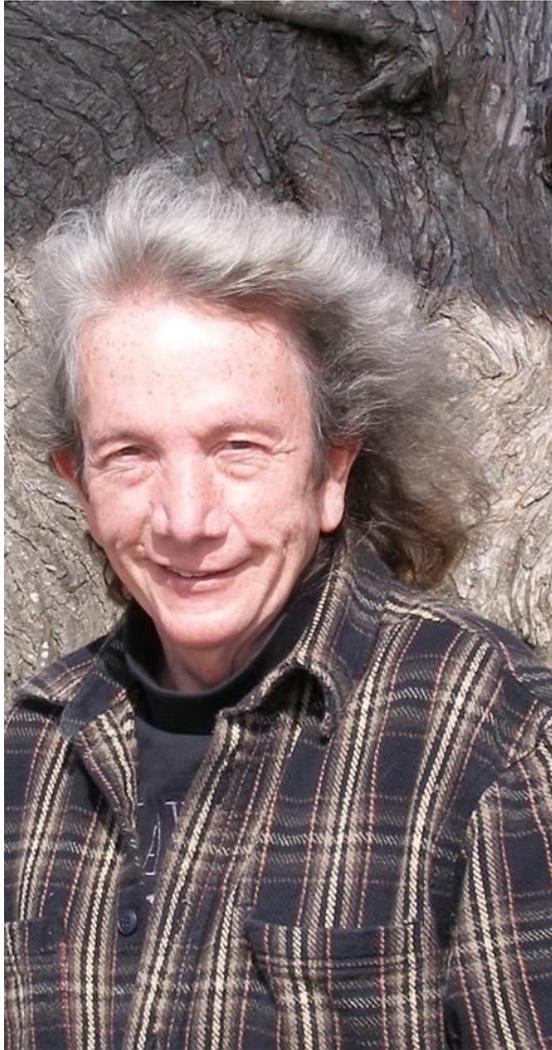


Despite reports of his death, this Vietnam veteran lived

Written by Jean Bartlett, February, 2017
(Written for the family and friends of David R. Hardcastle)



Jean Bartlett photo. David Hardcastle, Pacifica, CA, 2008.

HARDCASTLE, DAVID R. (1946-2015)

The first time I interviewed David Hardcastle was in 2008 for an article in the *Pacifica Tribune*. The article particularly highlighted David's days in Vietnam and subsequent days of physical recovery. The second story I did on David was in 2014. This story, which ran in *Coastal Connections*, was inspired by a friendship David had formed with another dad. This other dad grew up in South Vietnam. He was a kid during the War. Both men had seen too much in Vietnam and had agreed that after their first conversation on the War, they would never revisit it. But their friendship was unbreakable. The third time I interviewed David, it was again for the *Pacifica Tribune*. It was January of 2015 and David had just received a notification of his death from the Department of Veterans Affairs. This was the second time this happened. This story here is a combination of these interviews, and the photos that ran with them, as well as information from my draft notes from all of our "story" visits over the years. It is especially inspired by these words from David in his 2014 interview.

"I feel my story, which is one of thousands of stories, isn't all that important except for maybe it will reach one veteran, who will understand and be comforted by what I say."

David was born in Kansas City, Kansas, on September 6, 1946. He said he had three last names because his mother had married three times. He was born David R. Hefner. He kept his mom's third husband's name, Hardcastle.

"We came to California when I was 5," David said in 2008. "We lived in Indian Wells, California, which is right next to Palm Desert. My father had given up his inheritance to be on his own and became a date rancher. Indian Wells, at least at that time, was the number one place where dates were grown in California. Following my parents' divorce, we moved to the City of Los Angeles, then to Glendale and then to Highland Park."

"I had a rough childhood but I made it rougher," David continued with a laugh. "When I was 9, I ran away with a girl. She talked me into it. I don't know that that is bad! We only ran away until midnight. We went to the market and loaded up on Franco American Spaghetti. She bought that with the money she grabbed out of her mother's purse. That was my foray into high crime. When I was 13, I took off for a week and I walked up into the hills in Glendale." (David did not elaborate on his week's adventures.)

"I was 19 when I received my draft notice, May of 1966. I was living in Idyllwild, California. At that time I was working my way up in the restaurant business as first cook. I worked underneath a chef from New York. I had actually started this training in high school. I was such a bad student that my mother enrolled me in this school which included my learning how to become a cook. My plan was to go to the California Culinary Academy in San

Francisco. I saw cooking as an art but I also wanted to make money as a chef so I could then pay my way into art school. Being a working artist was my ultimate goal. I started sketching when I was very young."

He was also engaged to be married when he got his notice.

"I had just gotten a whopping speeding ticket. I figured if I didn't pay the ticket, that might get me jail time and if my girlfriend and I got married sooner, both things would defer my entrance into the Army. But my girlfriend paid my speeding ticket and we didn't get married before I left. She sent me a 'Dear John' letter when I was training at Fort Riley (Kansas).

When I was drafted, they reactivated a former tank division from the Second World War, the 9th Division. What that means is that all the guys that I went in with in LA were put into that Division and trained together as a unit for almost six months."

The 9th Infantry Division arrived in Vietnam in December of 1966. "We were on the USS General John Pope out of the Naval Air Station Alameda. Psychic Jeane Dixon had predicted our ship would go down on its way to Vietnam. Everyone worried about that all the way over.

"My first moments in Vietnam were a precursor to what Vietnam was really all about. I was walking down the plank to shore. I was decked out with machine guns and I had put two grenades on my webbing. The grenades fell out and landed on the plank because I didn't check that they were screwed in. I had not touched the detonator so thankfully the grenades didn't go off. Here we were to save the world and I could have blown up everyone just getting off the ship. I found that to be representative of most of the injuries I saw in Vietnam; injuries caused not by combat but by stupid stuff. The image of war and the reality of war are very different."

The thing that really surprised David in Vietnam and in boot camp was the rampant racism. "Everyone in our platoon really liked our Sergeant. He was a good guy and good leader and he didn't put up with nonsense. But some of the officers over him didn't like him because he was black – and they didn't like our platoon because we liked our Sergeant. Unbelievable stuff. I thought once we were in a war zone, racism would just go away because it was so in the way. But it was just as bad."



David Hardcastle in the "Rung Sat" Special Zone, outside of Saigon, 1967.

David said there was a lot to get used to in Vietnam.

"I remember sleeping in water with my head in a tree. One guy that had a mattress went down the river because he didn't tie it right. Every so many weeks our boots would rot out and our feet weren't too great. I was almost court-martialed for having a hole in my pants."

The veteran often noted the hardest thing about Vietnam was not combat but coping with insects and other wild life.

"Red ants don't sting they bite. They do a headstand on you and twist. I was walking along in countryside, not swamps, when somebody started shooting. I couldn't see what was going on but I was down on the ground immediately – that's good Army training. I could see that I landed in a pile of buffalo dung with red ants eating it. I'm thinking maybe I should put my thumb up and get a million dollar wound – it might be worth it. But I didn't do that. I just kept getting bit."

David also recalled a minister that was nearly felled by red ants. This one really appealed to his wry sense of humor.

"A minister came out to help us and give us some 'God' stuff and he is walking through the swamps and a red ant nest fell on his back. He got down on his hands and knees and prayed to get out of Vietnam. They brought a helicopter to bring him out and the rest of us were just standing there and that's how I learned about religion."

There were water buffalos, massive snakes and saltwater crocodiles.

"One day we came out of the jungle into rice paddies and a little baby water buffalo was chasing our big Sergeant. And this baby's really big mother came in and gored one guy. People got scared and acted stupid. The guy with the machine gun just started firing and luckily he didn't kill any of us. But he did shoot the mom's tail off so she was really mad. This other guy, who was only two feet from the mother, had an M16 with a grenade launcher adapter and he actually fired it at her. Well the grenade just hit her in the head and fell down because he was too close. Good thing or he would have killed himself and anyone else that was in its kill zone.

Another day, this guy and I were scouting out a village. This guy is maybe twelve feet in front of me and he quietly points out the head of a snake looking right at him. I see the end of that snake by me. It must have been 15-feet long. We didn't check out that village. As to saltwater crocodiles, when we saw one we'd put a guard on it so the rest of us could cross the water.

I was there eight months when I realized that I was there long enough that I was going to make it home. It seemed if you were going to have a bad break, it happened the first month or so, when you were the most inexperienced.



David in the salty mangrove swamp which the Americans called "Rung Sat."



**On this day in 1967, David's job was ammo bearer.
Camp Bearcat, Mekong Delta, Vietnam.**

David said "for political reasons" he was separated from his troop. "I was transferred into an outfit with nice guys but they were new to combat – and that's what got me. I wasn't a trained radio man but I was the only one in this new company who knew how to operate it. I mention this because wearing that bulky radio on my back is what saved me." What happened, however, altered his life forever.

"On July 31, 1967, our troop's Second Lieutenant went down the trail in front of me. He was standing by a tree on the right of me, shaking his foot because he thought it was caught in a vine. It was a trip wire and it went off. It was a big Chinese mine and it hit 5 people. The Lieutenant was saved by the tree, the other three guys were pretty much okay – but I was blown up.

I was hit everywhere except on my back where the radio was. Everybody thought I was dead till they brushed the dirt away and then they gave me morphine. I had shrapnel in my face, my arms, my legs, my skull, my teeth – everywhere. My helmet had blown off. I heard myself whimpering but I had disconnected."

A helicopter took David to a Mash Unit and then to a hospital in Saigon. He heard the doctors taking inventory of his body parts in Saigon. He woke up during surgery and thought the surgeons had removed his lower left arm. In actuality they were cleaning it of metal debris. He stayed in Saigon for a few weeks and then was flown to Japan for further surgeries and more rehabilitation. He was flown to Japan because there were no beds available in San Francisco or Los Angeles.

In Japan he overheard a doctor at the foot of his bed say to another doctor, "I'm not sure if he understands anything."

Paralyzed on his right side, he was told by doctors he would never walk, or if he did and fell down, he would never be able to get back up again. Doctors doubted, due to the shrapnel damage in his teeth and mouth, if he would be able to talk. With the help of nurses and other wounded soldiers, David learned to walk in Japan. One time, when he nearly fell, a soldier with a broken arm caught him. That soldier's arm had to be reset.

"Other patients and the nurses really helped me. They thought with their hearts and didn't go by the book. The guys used to hang around my bed and make me laugh which broke all the stitches next to my mouth, but because of that, I actually can smile."

Next long stop was Letterman Hospital in San Francisco. With the help of a great speech therapist, David was able to talk by the end of the year. From the moment he was wounded, he spent about two years in hospitals.

"Everything was affected. I've been told I'm a walking miracle. According to the Army, you can be rated 100 percent with things wrong. According to the Army, I am rated 270 percent disabled.

In many ways, I had to rehabilitate myself. My right foot should be a drop foot but I trained it on my own not to move and I learned how to fake it. I taught myself to be left-handed. With a lot of work, I do have use of my right arm and hand. I trained myself, not for me, but for society to be comfortable with me. The first thing I learned was to be patient with other people and do what you can do for yourself.

Before I went to Vietnam, I thought I would die or come home intact. I had no idea I would be injured. When I see Iraq and see so many injured – I know, it's just devastating to be injured and I don't think these kids are being taken care of, at the very least emotionally. When you are injured either physically or mentally, it's something you are not prepared for in any way. Physical and emotional pain can dictate to you."

David married. He and his wife Kayoko had a son, Duke. "Duke is my greatest joy," the proud father said many times. The family eventually settled in the coastal city of Pacifica, just 15 minutes south of San Francisco, and David graduated from the San Francisco Academy of Art University. The right-hander had retrained his left hand to do art and he was an exhibited artist. He was a devoted dad and did countless hours of volunteerism at his son's elementary school, Ocean Shore. He continued to volunteer at the school long after his son graduated and was greatly valued. The school noted just a few of the volunteer jobs he did: worked on (what are now the school's former) ancient copy machines, created art projects for various grade levels, taught PowerPoint to sixth graders, taught "fun with computers" during lunchtime, worked as an art instructor for students in the special education program, and provided assistance as needed to teachers and parents.

"The fact that I got married and I have a son is shocking to the doctors," David said in 2008. "I suppose eventually I will find that life will prove them right. Someday I will die and I can't do certain things and they always said, 'You can't do this.' But mostly I like to think, I have always proved doctors wrong in all the best ways for me."

Kayoko said David's wounds and their effects were more than David wanted others to know. His right side was two-thirds paralyzed. He couldn't feel his right hand, but with a lot of personal training, he trained himself to hold it out to shake hands. Because he could not feel the grip of his hand, at times he was told his grip was too strong. He walked with a limp and as he aged it was harder for him to work with his right leg and he would fall. Handwriting with his left hand was very difficult and he wanted it to be perfect. Writing a one-page letter might take him all night. It wasn't until later, after the couple divorced, that David told Kayoko that part of his brain had been injured as well and sometimes it was very hard for him to push his thoughts out. He didn't like to say, "I can't do it."

In 2006, David was diagnosed with gastrointestinal cancer.

"Kayoko – who is still very much my good friend – and I were still married then and she rushed me to the hospital where it was discovered I had a tumor the size of a baseball. It was removed."

David said he was given a miracle drug which stopped the cancer. Two years later he was rushed again to the hospital. His cancer had recurred. It was in his liver.

"The VA hospital in Palo Alto gave me some new medicine that worked really well for a while."

On November 13, 2014, David received a notice from the Veterans Administration.

"In this notice the VA announced my death. I was supposed to have dinner with a friend. I told her I hoped she didn't mind being seen with a dead man. I phoned the VA and reported that I was living. They told me they thought I was someone else and they apologized."

In the first week of December, 2014, Kayoko took David to the VA hospital in Palo Alto for a scheduled doctor's appointment. David was in agony and he could barely walk. During his checkup, Kayoko was called back as was their son Duke. David was hospitalized. His cancer had returned with a vengeance. Kayoko and Duke were told David would probably only live a few weeks and the two were given a tour of the Hospice and Palliative Care wing.

"I was really down. At my worst point, when I was so drugged up with pain medication that I couldn't think clearly, Kayoko got a letter from the VA again announcing my death. They also sent her my VA benefits and a check for my funeral. She phoned our son who had just seen me but the letter freaked them out."

Kayoko rushed to the Palo Alto VA. She discussed her "mail" with David's social worker. She additionally talked to the Department of Veterans Affairs. She returned the uncashed checks. Their son also went to bat for David at the VA Hospital in Oakland.

"I was so sick. I couldn't do anything about it. But Kayoko, Duke and my VA social worker really got on it, and my social worker was relentless. Eventually I was declared undead. Always the staff here at the Palo Alto VA has been uncommonly kind and dedicated."

In a letter of resolution dated January 16, 2015, the VA advised the veteran that his benefits would resume by the first of February. The letter noted that "verification that you are living" was the contributing factor to their decision.

"I have been told that this is caused by computers not talking to each other and human error. But this kind of error ruins people lives. What does a veteran do if they don't have family or friends to help them? The VA needs to do better than this."

David spent the rest of his life at the Palo Alto VA hospital where he died on December 14, 2015.

"I hope to turn a corner and go home," David said during one visit. "But here at the VA Hospital in Palo Alto, I am under the care of angels."



Jean Bartlett photo. Valentine's Day 2015. David in his room at the Palo Alto VA hospital is surrounded by art and love from his community of friends at Ocean Shore Elementary School.