

If you've never served, don't be too quick to judge

Even on a drab, gray day, the view is good from the 17th floor of the Ruan Center.

The rain is falling, the dark clouds hang low over the city, but a visitor can still get a panoramic look at downtown Des Moines.

Uneventful seems the best description of the life going on in silent slow motion below.

This is Kenneth Quinn's universe now as the president of the World Food Prize Foundation. His universe wasn't always so tranquil.

In 1967, Quinn, his wife, Le Son, and their children came under rocket attack at their home in Phnom Penh. Quinn was the United States ambassador to Cambodia.

He and Le Son threw the children to the floor and sheltered them with their bodies. Imminent rocket attack is seldom a worry south of Grand.



MARC HANSEN

I'm not sure what to call Quinn as he ushers me into a meeting room. Dr. Quinn? Ambassador Quinn? Mr. Food Prize President? Just plain Ken?

Quinn earlier was a member of Henry Kissinger's Security Council staff. He was head of several POW/MIA commissions. That's how he met Bob Kerrey.

On loan from the State Department, he was also a big player in Bob Ray's refugee resettlement program. Bronx-born, Duquesne-raised, Loras College-

educated, Quinn might just own the queen mother of Des Moines resumes.

I dropped by not to check his credentials but to get his take on the Kerrey controversy.

Last week came the news: Thirty-two years ago, Kerrey and his commando unit had killed more than a dozen unarmed women and children in Vietnam.

Quinn spent 6½ years in Vietnam as a rural development officer for the State Department. He figured when he became a diplomat he'd be sipping wine at soirees in Paris.

But no. Good morning, Vietnam. The funny part is, he kept coming back.

Quinn never shot anyone in his role as an adviser in the Mekong Delta, but he was shot at and hit, wounded in a North Vietnamese rocket attack.

Quinn is proud of the fact

no civilians were killed in his district on his watch. An admirer of Kerrey — "I think the world of him" — he is saddened by the news that so many died on the night of Feb. 25, 1968.

Quinn accompanied troops on more than 250 hours of helicopter and ground combat operations. He knows firsthand what most of us can only surmise.

He knows the fear and the confusion an inexperienced, 25-year-old Kerrey must have felt that night.

Quinn saw that fear. He felt it himself, especially on his first tour. Until you'd been there a while, until you could recognize the enemy without a scorecard, it was natural to see a sniper around every corner.

"Your apprehension level was very high when you got there," he says. "You didn't know the environment. You didn't know who was

potentially dangerous and who was not. The training you had received stressed the dangers so that you'd be careful. As you got more experienced, you were able to discern the differences.

"If you were put into areas you didn't know, that, too, would increase your apprehension. If you were behind enemy lines, at night, as Kerrey was, you felt the danger could be anywhere and everywhere."

But did Kerrey order the murder of Vietnamese civilian women and children? Did he round them up and have them killed?

He and several members of his unit say no. Another member of his squad says yes.

"When the shooting started in Vietnam," Quinn says, "and particularly if larger weapons were used, civilians could be inadvertently killed, which was terrible, but not

intentional. That's what it sounded like Bob Kerrey was saying happened.

"The other guy told the story of people standing there, and an order given to shoot and kill them. No one I know would think you could ever do something like that in Vietnam."

Who speaks the truth? Who knows. Maybe not even Kerrey or his accuser. Memories fade like old videotape in 32 years.

"When there is shooting going on and life is at stake," Quinn says, "the self-preservation instincts take over. It's not too difficult to imagine how unintended things would happen."

As almost anyone who served in Vietnam would attest, if you weren't there that night, you'd best not judge.

Marc Hansen can be reached at (515) 284-8534 or hansenm@news.dmreg.com

"If you've never served, don't be too quick to judge"

Clipped By:



kquinn487

Thu, Dec 7, 2017