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MEN of GOODWILL

aboard the *USS Constellation*.

Mr. Bennett says the news that he would fight in the war was no surprise. "As soon as I entered officer candidate school I knew I would go to Vietnam."

The first few days aboard the ship were difficult, Mr. Bennett says. Some men were seasick; many were homesick. But most had little time to think of anything as they were so busy.

At one point, the ship ran into a typhoon. Though he had never been to sea until assigned aboard the *Constellation*, Mr. Bennett was "the only one not blue, green or shades thereof" as the rough waters rocked the ship.

life. "At 26, you think you're immortal," he says. "Besides, you're so busy you don't have time to think about it."

"But at night, when you couldn't sleep — that's when you were scared."

Besides, he says, the danger he experienced was nothing comparable to the helicopter pilots responsible for searching for fallen American soldiers. With their large, bulky helicopters the men were easy targets for the enemy, Mr. Bennett says.

Before flying over the jungles of Vietnam, the pilots sat down to a meal of steak and eggs. Mr. Bennett ate that same meal before flying out one day for what would be his last mission.

He was in the fighter plane, a typical day. All around him were surface-to-air, SAM, missiles. Pilots knew they were coming by their distinctive sound. Then they could see them: like big telephone poles with a rocket at the end.

"Usually, you could out-manuever the SAMs," Mr. Bennett says. Usually — but not always.

Mr. Bennett heard an explosion. Then he felt the plane rock. His warning lights went on. He began to lose pressure.

He had the option of bailing out. "But I thought, with my luck, I'd find the only shark that had never tasted kosher meat."

So he drove the plane in, to the amazement of his colleagues.

When the fighter finally landed aboard the *Constellation*, Mr. Bennett discovered half the plane's right wing had been blown off. His engine was gone. Blood flowed like a river

down his leg, which to this day contains bits of shrapnel.

After the war, Mr. Bennett taught at the Naval Academy in Annapolis. He later worked as a police officer and today, he sells insurance.

Mr. Bennett says he never considered leaving for Canada or burning his draft card to avoid the war.

"I was always raised with the feeling that you owe something to your country," he says. "I'd read all about the pogroms and I thought, if you're living in a free country, you have obligations."

World War II vet Jack Schwartz understands.

"Today, everybody worries about himself," he says. "But my generation — and my father's and my grandfather's — worried about our children. That's why we fought."

"Still, I hope we're the last veterans. I hope there will never be another war." □

**Many of the vets at the
hospital are in wheelchairs.
They're older men, some of
whom bear the most terrible
reminders of the war:
stumps of legs blown off by
land mines, and wounds that
never heal. They smoke
incessantly, dropping soft
ashes into trays attached to
the side of their chairs.**

Mr. Bennett shared a room with two other officers. He had a desk, a bed and a sink. He took the call sign, the name pilots use to communicate with each other, of "rabbi."

The *Constellation* settled off the coast of North Vietnam. From there, Mr. Bennett flew two or three missions a day. He logged some 120 missions while stationed aboard the ship.

Vietnam was a political, not a strategic, war, Mr. Bennett says. He spent much of his time bombing bridges that would be rebuilt the next day. Military decisions were made in Washington, D.C., not by Army and Navy experts. Mr. Bennett is still angry about it.

"But what upsets me most is wasting people's lives," he says. He remembers when his roommate was shot down, and Mr. Bennett had to write his wife, who was seven months pregnant, with the news.

Mr. Bennett rarely feared for his own