

Always faithful

By BOB PALMER | Posted: Saturday, October 13, 2012 1:05 pm

Patrick Brown of Mount Pleasant goes to funerals.

That may not sound all that unusual. A lot of us go to funerals.

Quite a few go to funerals for people we knew in another life. Bonds formed while in one of the country's armed forces follow us to the edge of the grave.

Patrick, however, is a member of what they call the Koh Tang Beach Club. He goes to funerals for men who have been dead 37 years.

If the name Koh Tang doesn't ring a bell with you, what about Mayaguez?

The Mayaguez was a US container ship high jacked Khmer Rouge in May of 1975. Saigon had fallen a few weeks earlier and President Gerald Ford did not want to appear weak or have this hostage situation linger for months like the Pueblo Incident in 1968.

Ford sent in the Marines.

Patrick Brown was a Marine. He was ready. He was with his unit – G Company, 2/9 Marines -- standing on the runway in Thailand preparing for a combat assault on the Cambodian island Koh Tang where the Khmer Rouge had taken the Mayaguez.

That's when his plans got changed.

"Gunny read out a list of names," Brown recalled. "My name was one of them and we were told to fall out."

Marine regulations stated only Marines over the age of 18 could be deployed into a combat situation. Brown was still 17.

Now he was a mad 17-year-old. Brown protested up and down the chain of command to no avail. When the helicopters lifted off May 15, 1975, Patrick was not aboard.

The rescue operation involving Marine, Air Force, Navy and Army elements became known as the last battle of the Vietnam War – an asterisk in the history books, but a story without an end for the Beach Club. Although mission to free the Mayaguez and her crew was accomplished, the price was high.

Done on the fly, intelligence under-estimated Khmer Rouge strength. Marines expected a small detail of less than a dozen soldiers on the island. Instead, the helicopters flew into inter-locking

machinegun fire backed up by mortars and rocket propelled grenades. More than 100 Cambodian troops were dug in on the island.

There is a technical term for this sort of situation. Charlie Foxtrot is the euphuism used in polite company.

After the Mayaguez and its crew were released, the decision was made to extract the Marines pinned down on the beach that night. Three helicopters were sent in. The last Air Force Green Giant stayed at the water's edge taking fire until they believed the last living Marine was aboard.

They were wrong.

A three-man machine gun crew was left behind in the dark. They would eventually be captured and executed by the Khmer Rouge. Recovering their bodies and the bodies of the other Marines left on that LZ is what drives Brown and the Koh Tang Beach Club.

“We are still bringing these people home,” Patrick told me. New DNA tests now allow for the identification of remains that were recovered four years ago.

Last week another member of the Beach Club came home. Pfc. James Jacques was laid to rest with full military honors at Fort Logan National Cemetery in Denver on what would have been his 56th birthday.

About 50 Vietnam War veterans holding American flags lined a street in the sprawling hilltop cemetery. Doves were released after three volleys were fired into the air.

Because of the distance, Patrick was unable to attend this funeral, but he made it to Morlington, Ark. James R. Maxwell was a friend. He was also one of the 41 who died that day.

Accompanied by Michael Brown, an Army and Marine vet, Patrick was struck by the 18-mile route to the cemetery lined with flags.

“The respect they paid was amazing,” Patrick said.

He goes to these funerals for a reason.

“We need to let people know,” he explained. He wants you to know about the young men left behind on a Cambodian beach, about a mission that went wrong and how those who were there are still proud of what they did that day.

And he won't rest until all his buddies are home. The Marine Corps motto is *Semper Fidelis* – always faithful. I think that applies here.