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Lessons of service changed vet's life

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HEDGESVILLE — Although he has not served in the military since the 1960s, Lee Badger of Hedgesville believes that his decision to join the military provided him one of the most significant opportunities of his life.

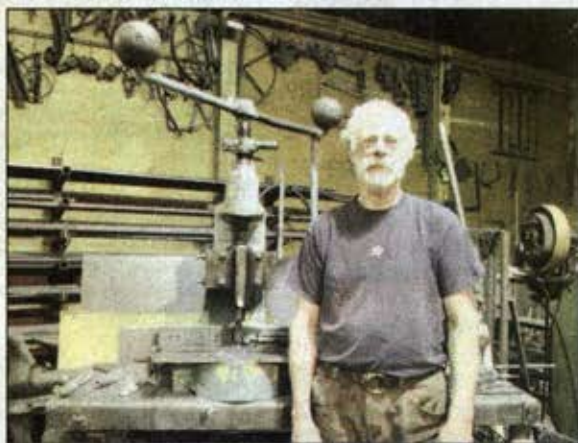
Badger joined the Navy in 1969 during the Vietnam War at age 18 and remained in the military for five years. Although he said his draft number was so high that the chance of him being drafted was slim, Badger decided to voluntarily join.

"They had an early

enrollment program, and I joined basically right out of high school. I had a high draft number so I probably would never have been drafted, and I thought, 'why not?'" he said. "I just thought it would be something pretty cool to do."

He said he joined the Navy for its "laid back" attitude, and became a hospital corpsman with specific training in physical therapy. Although he always knew there was a chance he would serve overseas, Badger spent his military time serving in hospitals and at the United States Naval Academy.

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Journal photo by Samantha Cronk

Navy veteran Lee Badger proudly displays his metal works shop Anvil Works, co-owned by Jason York. Badger partly attributes his success in owning his own business to the lessons he learned during his five years in the Navy from 1969 to 1974.

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After completing his medical and physical therapy training, Badger received orders to serve aboard the U.S.S. America, but soon before his departure he was ordered to serve as a physical trainer for the Naval Academy's athletics program.

While his primary duty was at the academy, his extra duties included serving at an area hospital treating soldiers wounded in Vietnam. With soldiers first cared for in Vietnam, then West Coast hospitals, by the time they arrived at the hospital Badger served in on the East Coast, most of the cases were for very specific injuries or because the soldier has family in the area, he said.

One of the specialized situations he remembers was a soldier who missed being hit by a small rocket, but the miss was so near that the rocket's wing cut the man's stomach down to the intestines.

As part of his hospital duty, Badger had to wash the man's intestines daily until the patient's doctor was positive there would be no risk

of infection due to any substance on the missile wing.

"It keeps you on your toes. I developed a passion for it, but you had to grow a thick skin," Badger said of his extra duty working in a hospital.

It was during his time serving in the hospital that he realized how important a support system was, whether friends, family or a VA center.

After deciding to leave the military, Badger had a hard time finding work in the physical therapy industry, saying that most businesses and colleges did not view his military training and experience as credible.

Despite the difficulty finding a job in the training field he said the transition from the military into civilian world was pretty easy, since most of his service time was fairly non-regimented. Most of the time, Badger said, he was not even required to wear a uniform.

"It wasn't hard for me, but it's hard for guys and women coming back that are in a lot more regimented situation and a lot more direct combat,

My brother was in Vietnam, and he was in combat. It takes longer to get over that. I didn't have guns and bombs and airplanes flying around," he said.

When he could not find a job in physical therapy, he turned to a long time passion of his, art. Throughout his active service time, Badger took advantage of colleges that offered free classes to military personnel and took several courses, including art.

Badger began experimenting with metal work, which has grown into a lifelong career. He moved to Hedgesville in 1991 and opened Anvil Works in 1998. Anvil Works is his workshop for functioning and artistic metal works, all custom made.

At times, Badger sees his metal work as a continuation of his medical training through healing arts. Often, he will create memorials for customers, which he said often helps provide closure or a step toward healing.

He believes that the lessons he learned in the military not only provided him

the fortitude to open and sustain his own business, but taught him life lessons as well.

He feels that serving in the military has provided him a better outlook on life, helped show him what was important in life, fostered tolerance, taught him to accept diversity and gave him a greater sense of pride for serving his country. He also feels that every citizen should spend at least two years serving their country, in any capacity.

"I am really, really glad that I was in (the military); I think everyone should have to serve their country for two years. It doesn't have to be the armed services. It could be working in the hospital, digging ditches or working out in the forest planting trees, but you should have to work two years regardless to help your country. Everybody that was in the military, regardless of their status or what they did, was helping their country," he said.

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