

THE *Corvette* RESTORER



THE WESTERN WEST

by Daniel Rechtfertig and Rich Koury

The automobile synonymous with the Vietnam Era is most often the Corvette because the strong new C2 body style Sting Ray was born in 1963, which is also when Southeast Asia began literally exploding militarily, and both Corvette and war demanded the attention of America's strong young men. We have all heard stories about guys who left their Corvettes in parents' garages to go to Vietnam and never return and the parents reluctantly sold the cars years later. But we have never heard a story like this about a Vietnam Corvette and its reconnection to that soldier 49 years later.

Rich Koury (NCRS #66510) fell in love with Corvettes in 1957 at age 10 sitting on the curb in front of his home in Raytown, Missouri. "The teenage neighbor living a block away drove his newly bought 1954 Corvette right in front of me with its shining white paint, red interior and convertible top down," Rich remembers. He thought this was the neatest car he had ever seen and resolved to have a Corvette someday. Today he's bought and sold hundreds of Corvettes as a small classic-car dealer (including six 1954s and two 1955s) and loves old Corvettes. He has never owned but one 1963 split-window coupe.

When GM introduced the C2 styling for its 1963 Corvette coupe, it was Rich's new neatest car and he knew he just had to have one. He frequented the local Chevrolet dealer often just to stare at Corvettes. His high-school life-guard job in the summers paid \$1 per hour and didn't seem to move his having one of these Corvettes beyond anything but a dream; albeit saving lives of several drowning people was more rewarding than money.

Two years later in 1965 and still determined to fulfill his dream of a 1963 Corvette split-window coupe,

he found one with green exterior, tan interior, automatic, and air conditioning. It was discovered at a dealer in Kansas City specializing in used Corvettes and could be had for \$2,300. After several days negotiating the price down to \$2,000 and then several more days talking his father into a loan, Rich went to the dealer only to find the car had sold hours earlier, ironically to a high school friend, thus ending his Corvette dream.

After graduating from high school in 1965, Rich volunteered for the military and entered basic combat training in Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, and then advanced infantry training in Fort Polk, Louisiana. He volunteered for deployment to Vietnam and quickly found himself deep in the mountains and jungles of the Central Highlands of South Vietnam along the Cambodian border as an Army combat infantryman.

Occasionally, he would witness a net full of supplies, including mail, being dropped into camp by helicopter. On his 20th birthday in 1967, somewhere deep in enemy territory, Rich opened a letter dropped from one such helicopter. It was a birthday card from his parents containing a picture of a beautiful 1963 Corvette split-window coupe in Sebring Silver and black interior complete with a huge red bow. The



Back in the day complete with the red bow!

note on the back of the picture in Dad's unmistakable handwriting said, "Now you have your Corvette when you come home." Several months later, somewhere in South Vietnam that picture of the Corvette would become just another casualty of the war.



Through mountains and jungles, Rich carried at least a half-dozen grenades, a claymore mine, two canteens of water, a shovel, an M16 rifle, a backpack with several days C-rations, and an unbelievable amount of 5.56 ammunition in 20-pound magazines. The letter, birthday card, and picture of the Corvette which weighed nothing actually seemed to lighten his load. Folded carefully in a plastic bag and stored in his backpack, the picture went everywhere with him humping the boonies as a grunt. Every day, he pulled the picture out, looked at it, and imagined driving his Corvette. He imagined his mom's perfume and dad's aftershave and their warm embrace and love for him.

He was far from the grunt he called himself; his task was a sergeant squad leader. Combat infantryman Rich and his squad rarely rode in trucks but always seemed to be walking or being transported by helicopter. However, during a rare ride in a convoy of deuce-and-a-half trucks, the North Vietnamese Army targeted the one where he and his squad were sitting atop bales of empty bags, known as sand bags and bale because the empty bags strapped together were about the size of a bale of hay.

Each night, infantryman would fill their 10 personal bags with dirt dug from their fox holes. They joked often that they were digging their own graves. Once filled, these bags were placed around and atop their fox holes in case a fire fight began with the enemy sneaking into camp. Typically, the dirt in the bags was dumped back into its hole in the morning and the bags packed up and tied to the backpack to be reused the next night. Nightly, a claymore mine with the

front toward the enemy connected Rich's little hole through a thin 100-foot-long wire. When needed, he would press his clacker three times and annihilate the beautiful natural sounds of the jungle and the enemy within it.

One particular day, Rich's squad was ordered to jump on a deuce-and-a-half truck and hitch a ride, sitting atop bales of empty sand bags destined for other soldiers. The big truck, in the middle of a large convoy of similar trucks, was torn apart by a remotely detonated IED (improvised explosive device), later determined to be a US Army 105mm artillery shell detonated from the roadside tree line. The disabled truck broke the convoy column in half, causing a choke point intentionally blocking the one-lane dirt road carved through the jungle and stranding everyone in place with no support.

It set up the perfect ambush allowing the enemy to rain down a calculated constant barrage of bullets from the opposing tree line. During the explosion and deafening concussion of sound and plume of fire and smoke, Rich recalls, in what seemed to be slow motion, thrown very high into the air and landing in the muddy roadside with his M16 rifle beside him, perfectly stuck barrel down deep in the mud. His backpack, containing the picture of the Corvette, which he had been leaning on in the truck probably saved his life but was incinerated in the fire. Now Rich would only be able to dream of his Vietnam Corvette.



leave, a high school friend and he took a ride in the 1963 Corvette to the Red Dog Inn for a few beers in Lawrence, Kansas, about 40 miles up the Kansas Turnpike. On the way back, the friend asked how fast this car would go and Rich responded, "Let's find out!" With the speedometer registering 145 MPH and tachometer near redline, Rich thought the front end seemed to lift, but the car kept going full speed and seemed to be asking for more. Then he saw small flashing red lights in the rearview mirror. "Who cares about technicalities of law when the North Vietnamese

army was shooting at you just a few days before, so I kept going full speed," recalls Rich, "but you cannot outrun the Kansas Highway Patrol when they set up a road block at the toll booth on the turnpike."

After stepping out of his patrol car and slowly walking up to the Sting Ray, the trooper asked Rich to get out. Rich remembers that the trooper then asked two questions: Did I know how fast I was going and had I been drinking? I answered both questions honestly and concluded with a snappy yes, sir. Somehow, by conversation or appearance, the trooper determined Rich was in the Army and just returned from Vietnam so he let him go without a citation and with the warning to drive slower. "Looking back the officer was thanking me for my service in Vietnam. I always wondered what my father would have said while he bailed me out of jail had the officer not exercised deference to a Vietnam war veteran."

Rich drove the 1963 Corvette for over two years as his daily driver while completing military service at Fort Knox, Kentucky, and then attending college at the University of Missouri. By then, his eye had been distracted. He just had to have the new generation mako shark-style C3 Corvette, so in 1969 Rich sold his 1963 to its next owner in Independence, Missouri. This allowed the purchase of a 1968 Corvette Bronze coupe with automatic transmission and air condition-

After much discussion with Rich about this event, I learned that he saw an unarmed injured squad member lying on the opposite and hot side of the road containing the enemy. This man was visibly injured with a badly broken and damaged leg, leaving him unable to move. Rich immediately advanced without a rifle through enemy rifle and machine-gun fire in a crouching run to the man where he performed "the perfect slide into home base." Rich landed right up against his squad member and began instinctively executing a dry-land version of the Boy Scout maneuver, which had earned him a merit badge years earlier as a teenager: the lifeguard cross-chest, palm-to-armpit carry.

Latched unbreakably to the squad member, Rich found his entire body swimming backward over the muddy road, using his free arm and both legs kicking and scraping through intense enemy fire, to drag his much larger companion back across the road. He recalls the journey took them in front of the burning truck to a spot out of the line of enemy fire. That night with the infantry company in defensive perimeter around the convoy trucks, the second lieutenant platoon leader told Rich he was being nominated for a Bronze Star. He refused it, telling the lieutenant to give it to the family of the most recent guy who paid the ultimate price and had earned it more than he [Rich] had.

In 1968, with his tour of duty behind him and having arrived home a few days earlier on temporary

ing from the same dealer which he had frequented often to look at Corvettes.

Always in his heart was the gift from his parents which he had longed for deep in the violent jungles of Vietnam, but Rich never searched for his Vietnam Corvette. He assumed he would never find it, or if he did, the owner would never sell it, or it would not be the same car he had loved because it would be restored to original condition.

Forty-nine years later in 2018, Rich was reunited with his 1963 Corvette through a chance encounter and subsequent discussion with a car friend who busied himself buying, selling and restoring classic cars and trucks. (Coincidentally, he operates Hero Fund USA, a nonprofit company serving first responders and military veterans.) He relayed the possible existence of the car because the seller mentioned that he had purchased it decades ago from a kid named Rich Koury. Remarkably, the car had been kept by the same owner who had bought it 49 years prior. That owner had maintained the car in the same configuration as when Rich sold it to him with mag wheels, trailer hitch and side pipes with just a few more miles on the odometer.

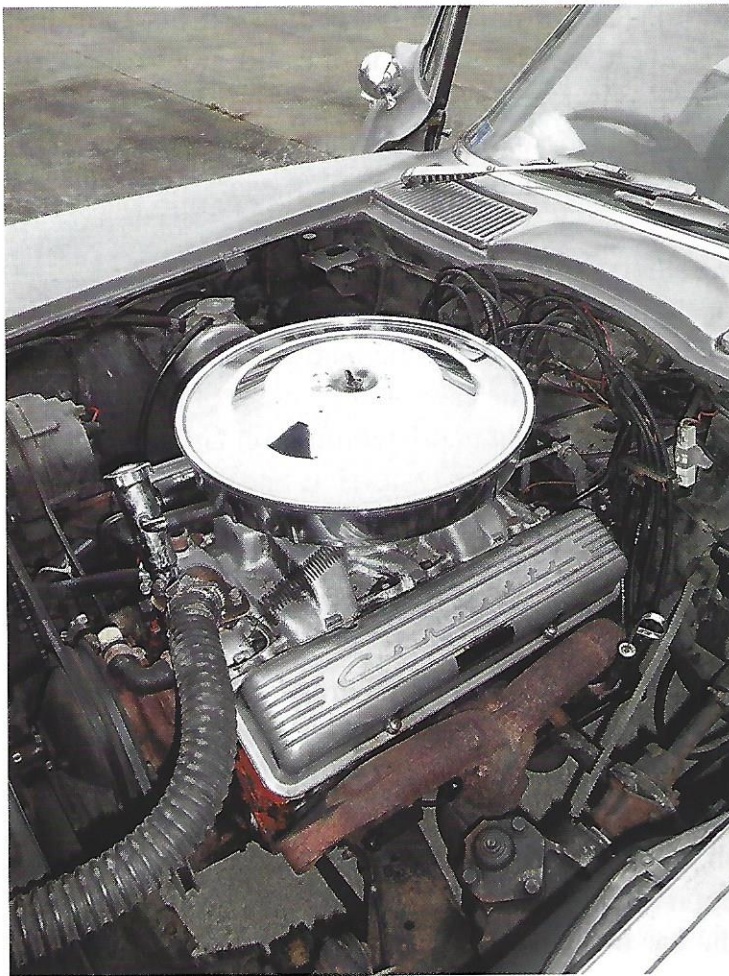
It had been purchased from that owner by a professional Corvette restorer a few days prior and was within hours of being fully dismantled to be made factory new from ground up. Rich miraculously intercepted it before it could be detached from its legacy. The car has a matching-number 327 cubic-inch 340-HP special high-performance engine with 4-speed transmission, and except for the radio, had no other options. The non-original modifications to the car when Rich had it were still present, including four Fenton Hawk magnesium wheels and the custom trailer hitch. Even though separated by a half century, at the speed of light from all the way across the

room, Rich immediately recognized his long-lost friend. It was as it was in the old picture, exactly as when his father bought it for him. Even the 1965 Corvette side-exhaust system that he had installed when he returned from Vietnam was still on the car.

Another chapter of this story demonstrates how guys in the Corvette world understand and respect what these cars represent for Vietnam veterans. The restorer had purchased the car with the intent of bringing it to NCRS Top Flight and Bloomington Gold standards. When Rich told the restorer it had been his car 49 years ago, his Vietnam connection to the car, and his cumulatively complicating incurable Agent Orange health problems, the man let him buy the car.

The 1963 Corvette was in barn-find condition; it had not been licensed since 1977 or started or driven for at least 10 years. Bob Spencer of Accent Automotive in Blue Springs, Missouri, a 50-year drag racer speed-shop owner and respected mechanic/engine builder put it back into service. Not with the idea of restoring the car or maintaining factory originality. Rather to resurrect it to the exact daily-driver condition of the 20-year-old kid who had sold it and then purchased it back half a century later and wanted to look back in time through the lens of his Vietnam Corvette. This was accomplished by inspecting and repairing all





mechanical and accessory systems to period-correct and daily-driver standards.

Rich had missed buying his first 1963 Corvette coupe by a few hours. Rich lost the only picture of his Vietnam Corvette in an ambush firefight on a dirt road somewhere in South Vietnam and couldn't ask his parents for another picture because letters sent from Vietnam could never disclose anything bad. Rich buried his parents long ago, and he still suffers from the wounds of war. While he found an identical picture going through his parents effects, Rich and his Corvette are all that remain to recall the times of their introduction and the violence of the war.

Rich made the mistake of selling his first and irreplaceable Corvette and regretted it most of his life. He corrected that mistake through the most improbable set of circumstances and with the assistance of Corvette guys brought it backward in time 49 years to its 1960s daily-driver operability and condition.

Rich volunteered for the U S Army in 1966 and was honorably discharged in 1968. During those years, he served as combat infantryman and infantry squad leader on patrol missions, search-and-destroy missions, combat assault missions from helicopters, and other volunteer exercises including long-range reconnaissance patrols behind enemy lines. He was also a tunnel rat, a participant in a team led by dog handlers to track and kill enemy, and an aerial observer of enemy positions and movements from airplane and helicopter to coordinate infantry and artillery engagement of enemy.

He was assigned to the 4th Infantry Division in the mountains along the Vietnam/Cambodia border for one year from 1967 to 1968. He attained the rank of sergeant and was awarded a combat infantryman's badge but refused a Purple Heart, a Bronze Star for valor, a battlefield commission to second lieutenant by General William Westmoreland, and direct appointment to West Point Military Academy by General Westmoreland, who was commander of all military forces in Vietnam 1964 to 1968.

Rich continues to fight an Agent Orange health problem of multiple myeloma cancer. His doctors do not give him a good prognosis. He laughs as his journey continues to defy the odds again and again just as he defied the odds in the Vietnam War. He is a retired trial attorney who practiced law in Independence, Missouri, for over 40 years and still has a classic car business, Rich's Cars in Grain Valley, Missouri, specializing in what else but Corvettes! He and his wife Cindy reside in Lee's Summit, Missouri, and Punta Gorda, Florida. He enjoys driving his 1963 Corvette and other classic cars frequently and keeps not-for-sale signs on the window when he is particularly fond of one. Ironically, his 1963 Corvette was in a residential garage about two miles away from his law office for 49 years.

Rich's parents bought this 1963 Corvette from the original owner in 1967 with about 60,000 miles. He put 20,000 miles on the car in the few years he owned it. During the subsequent 49 years before it was repurchased, that owner only put about 25,000 miles on the car. Total mileage is now 107,000.

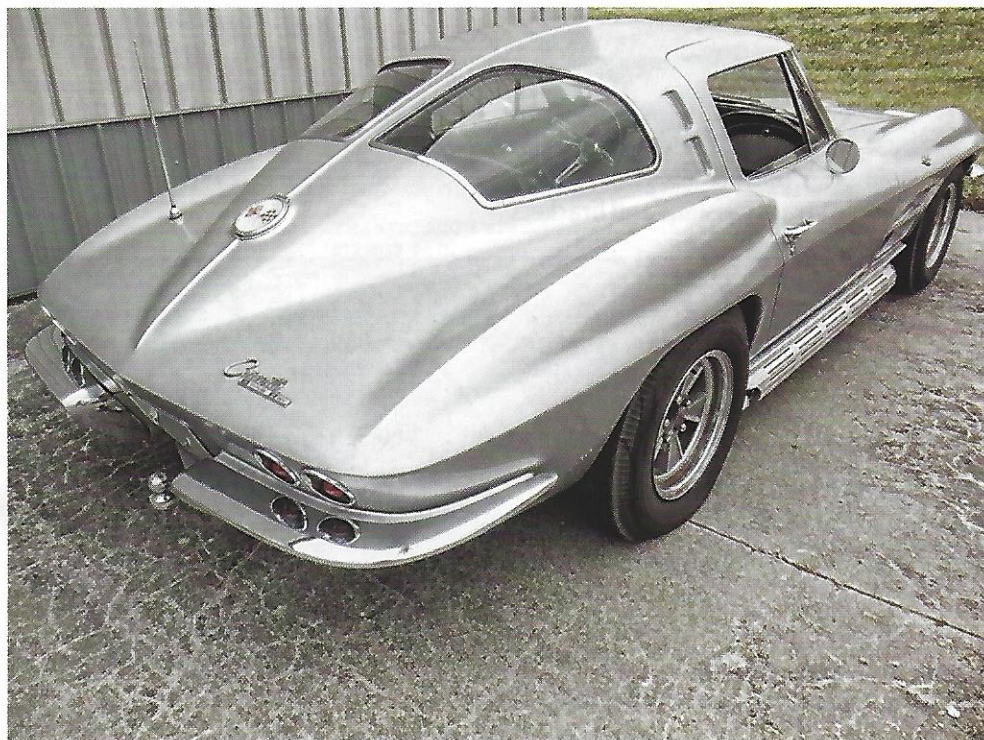
Rich wants this 1963 Corvette and his story to be a message to many who have suffered through the scars of war. From physical to emotional, from individual to family, they are all very real and often very deep scars. No one can change the past, but Rich wants you to know that he understands the exhaustive fight. He has been in and out of doctors' offices, clinics and hospitals all around the country, traveling at his own expense, where he has continued to fight the cancer for years with the hope of beating it. He must wear a surgical mask and latex gloves everywhere he goes because the cancer treatment has compromised his immune system. But Rich makes the best of today.

I would not otherwise mention this, but Rich stipulated I must include that I own five 1963 split-window Corvette coupes. I obviously share Rich's passion for this particular car. However, I am unquestionably on bended knee when it comes to which one of us has the coolest 1963 Corvette. Rich and I talk about war often. My dad was a Vietnam War veteran, and our



family loved him, wounds and all. Dad later came to despise war and became a conscientious objector as I would too. As far as Rich and I go, our differences unite us and this is all just fine. I

It is amazing how much encouragement I have derived from him over the years. You would never know he was disabled if it weren't for his mask and gloves because he does not let cancer get him down. He is often heard to say, "The North Vietnamese Army tried to kill me and couldn't; I'm not going to let Agent Orange kill me." Years ago, Rich tasked me with finding him another '63 Corvette coupe so he could relive those years; yet, nothing I showed him melted his heart. Seeing the recent improbable reunion with his Vietnam Corvette, I'm glad Rich is Rich. He just keeps focusing forward.



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