

# Vietnam Vets Lend a Hand to 21st-Century's Wounded Warriors

For eight years, the Aleethia Foundation has given hospital-bound veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan a Friday night out

**H**al Koster knows the costs of war and the damage inflicted on those who fight it. By the time he left Vietnam in June 1969 after 25 months as a gunship crew chief, he'd seen plenty of his comrades killed and seriously wounded. His first six months with the 174th Assault Helicopter Company "was pretty quiet," so, because he loved the flying, he re-upped in late January 1968 for another tour. It was three days before Tet. "Of our eight gunships, on the first day of Tet, seven were shot up too bad to fly. But there were troops on the ground in trouble, so we had to fly with just one gunship for a while." Koster said the rest of his time in Vietnam was pretty intense.

When the Minnesotan's tour was done, so was his military career. Three hours after landing at Fort Lewis, Koster was discharged. "Three hours later I was in a store buying civilian clothes. I threw my uniform in the trash," Koster said, intent to move on with his life. Back home, he studied computers and before long was started on a 30-year career in business.

He has lived in the Washington, D.C., area since 1978, and a chance encounter with former Washington Redskins football player Fran O'Brien in 1996 led to Koster becoming a partner in Fran O'Brien's Steak House. It was there that he met fellow Vietnam vet Jim Mayer, who lost both legs in the war and had been visiting the Walter Reed amputee ward since 1992 to give support to vets there.

In 2003, as wounded started coming back from Iraq and Afghanistan, Mayer told Koster that the extent of their injuries was requiring long hospital confinements, and suggested a great way to get them out for a break would be for a nice steak dinner. Koster was in. Just weeks later he hosted the first "Friday Night Out" for Walter Reed and the National Naval Medical Center patients. He couldn't foresee that eight years later, after some 300 dinners, there would still be a need.

When Walt Sides of Rolling Thunder heard about the dinners, he enthusiastically put his organization behind the endeavor. Koster, in turn, joined Rolling Thunder, later tapped for its board of directors.

By 2005, as support, and expenses, for the dinners were mushrooming, Koster established the Aleethia Foundation to accept tax-deductible donations. Aleethia

is Greek for "truth," and, Koster said, "The truth about war is that there will be casualties."

When Fran O'Brien's closed in 2006, Koster had to find other restaurants to hold the Friday Night Dinners. Paul Wolfowitz, former assistant secretary of defense, was instrumental in arranging for foreign embassies to play host a number of times each year. Hundreds of individuals and organizations support the foundation's effort financially.

Another truth about war, Koster said, is that the wounded often face difficult situations beyond their medical considerations. "So we've begun providing small financial grants to help them bridge different situations. We also started supplying other short-term recreational activities such as sightseeing drives and movies, and smaller dinners and nights out." And, Rolling Thunder members will provide rides in the Memorial Day weekend events to patients who want to attend.



LEFT: COURTESY OF HAL KOSTER; RIGHT: LAURA BZEZINSKI



**Hal Koster, aboard a gunship in Vietnam in 1969, and at a recent Friday Night Dinner (left) with Rolling Thunder President Walt Sides and a pair of wounded patients from Walter Reed Army Hospital.**

Since 2003, the number of individual dinners served to vets and their families via Koster and the Aleethia Foundation has topped 25,000.

Koster said he has been overwhelmed by the support for the troops from the American people. "It has really renewed my faith in our country," he said.

For more information about the Aleethia Foundation and how to support its weekly Friday Night Dinners and other efforts, go to [www.Aleethia.org](http://www.Aleethia.org).