

Vietnamese immigrant from Plymouth looks to link soldier with dog tag

By Lane Lambert

The Patriot Ledger

Posted Oct 10, 2013 @ 06:12 AM

Last update Oct 10, 2013 @ 09:02 AM

Video



The story of the dog tags

PLYMOUTH — Peter Nguyen doesn't know if Angel Torres is alive. But he's trying to find out.

The only clue the 45-year-old Vietnam native and longtime Plymouth resident has is a U.S. Army dog tag with Torres' name. An uncle who still lives in the Southeast Asian country gave him the worn aluminum ID a few years ago, during one of Nguyen's visits home.

His uncle said he'd taken the tag from a cafe table where a **Viet Cong** guerrilla fighter left it, in 1970 or '71. His uncle said he'd overheard the fighter brag to his buddies that the tag had been worn by an American soldier he'd shot – or claimed to have shot. After all these years, Nguyen hopes he can learn whether that's true, or if Torres made it home.

"I'd really like for him to have this," Nguyen said, clasping the tag between his thumb and forefinger. "Or his family."

He doesn't have much to go on. The dog tag is stamped "Torres Angel R," with the ID number RA-11-820-381. It says Torres was Catholic, with Type A blood.

Nguyen is a 20-year Plymouth County Sheriff's Department employee, a former corrections officer and now the department's warehouse supervisor. Born in 1968 – the year of the war's turning-point Tet Offensive – he was 10 when his family escaped to the Philippines by boat after the war.

He was 12 when he and his mother and three sisters settled in Plymouth, with the aid of the First Baptist Church in Scituate, which sponsored them as refugees. Young as he was then, he's not sure how to trace a tag that's now more than 40 years old.

A U.S. Army spokeswoman said Wednesday that establishing identification from a Vietnam-era tag is possible – though not right now, given the federal government shutdown, because such records must be requested. But a private investigator who formerly worked with Nguyen said the 11 in the ID number suggests that Torres was likely from one of the New England states.

Former Plymouth County corrections officer David Rich, now a Florida investigator, said Nguyen asked him for help. Rich said information from veterans and POW-MIA organizations indicates that the Torres dog tag was issued no later than 1967.

He said the "RA" – for regular army – indicates that Torres enlisted and wasn't drafted.

Nguyen had already checked the Vietnam Veterans Memorial's web site and found a soldier with a very similar name -- Angelo Torres, spelled with an O -- who was from Chicago and was killed in action in 1967. That Torres was killed in a different part of Vietnam -- near the Cambodia border, across the country from where Nguyen's uncle found the dog tag.

Nguyen grew up near Cam Ranh Bay, where the U.S. had a major naval base during the war. His uncle – then in his late teens – was in Phan Thiet, on the South China Sea coast halfway between Cam Ranh and the capital of Saigon. The U.S. also had a small base in Phan Thiet.

Nguyen said his uncle gave him the tag after so many years because he thought Nguyen might be able to locate the soldier's family. Nguyen started a search after he brought it home in 2009, "and then I forgot about it," he said, until he found the tag in a change tray last week.

He also has a personal reason to find Torres or his relatives. Nguyen's father was a captain in the South Vietnam Navy. At the end of April 1975, as North Vietnamese forces closed in on Saigon, Nguyen's mother was told that his father had just been killed in action.

"One day before the war ended," Nguyen said.

If Angel Torres is alive, Nguyen figures he would now be in his early to mid-60s – not much younger than his father would be had he survived the war. If Torres didn't make it home, "I want his family to have this," Nguyen said of the dog tag. "I'll fly anywhere to give it to them."

Lane Lambert may be reached at llambert@ledger.com or follow him on Twitter @LLambert_Ledger.

Business News

Real Assets Have Been in Real Trouble. Does This End the 'Commodity Supercycle'?

Credit Card Debt Continues Its Steady Decline

Your Smartphone is Easy to Hack, and Your Money Is In It

Suggested Stories

Braintree mall shoplifting suspects charged

Cops: Quincy man was carrying loaded pistol while...

Two Hanover restaurants to close; 100 to lose jobs

From the Web

North Korea Like You Have Never Seen Before Vice

Navy Special Ops: Beyond the SEALs STACK

Do Veterans Get Special Credit for Social... AARP.org

Sponsored content What's this?