

Longest-Serving Texas Ranger a VFW Member

Joe W. Haralson reflects on his tenured career under the Texas Department of Public Safety — where he has worked in various capacities since his return from the Vietnam War

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Joe W. Haralson is the longest-serving Texas Ranger, but the significance of that accolade doesn't resonate with the Vietnam War veteran.

"All that means is I was born before the rest of them," said Haralson, a member of VFW Post 8248 in La Marque, Texas.

Haralson joined the Rangers in June 1981 after a decade-long stint with the Texas Department of Public Safety's (DPS) highway patrol and motor vehicle theft divisions. Prior to that, he served two deployments in Vietnam (1969 and 1970), spending 13 months in country, first with the 1st Bn., 26th Inf., 1st Inf. Div., and later with the Americal Division's 4th Bn., 21st Inf., 11th Light Inf. Bde., as an Army infantryman. His journey with DPS began within one year of returning stateside.

"I saw those patrol cars, and I admired them," Haralson said, "and while that was fresh on my mind, there was a public service announcement on television, saying they were accepting applications."

Though Haralson said he doesn't know if his time in Vietnam directed his career path, he believes it gave him a "more clear understanding" of what's important in life.

From Patrolman to (Recon) Ranger

After serving as a highway patrolman, Haralson transitioned to a role with the Texas Rangers, a division under the Texas DPS — a position he still holds today.

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While he said there is not a “more important job” in DPS than patrolling the state’s highways, he said his move to the Rangers led to specialized training in various “criminal investigative disciplines,” including evaluating crime scenes and interviewing techniques.

The tenets of responsibility, dedication and loyalty to his fellow soldiers that he gained from his time in Vietnam transferred not only to his public safety career, but, he said, everyday life.

“You depend on them, they depend on you,” Haralson said. “I think that’s probably the lesson that I learned.”

The Vietnam War veteran also was a founding member of the Ranger Reconnaissance Team, a division of Texas Rangers that formed in 2009.

“Border security is a big deal in the United States right now, especially in Texas, and all states [that] have an international border,” Haralson said. “Several years ago, the Department of Public Safety created this Ranger Recon team and got some additional training and went to the border. And working with our Border Patrol partners down there, we spent time trying to intercept not aliens as much as smugglers — smuggling illegal narcotics and illegal contraband up here.”

Haralson worked on that team from its inception until last year. He also handled cases ranging from theft and assault to homicide.

“Everything is important to the victim,” Haralson said. “I don’t know one particular case that stands out. Everything that we do, you [have to] keep your mind wrapped up and around the fact that everything is important to somebody.”

Over the years, the biggest change he has seen within the Rangers relates to science and technology, specifically DNA identification and the Automated Fingerprint Identification System (AFIS). Through it all, he has taken to heart that he can “defend those who cannot defend themselves” in his role as a Texas Ranger.

“The focus of any policeman is to arrest defendants, bring them to trial and have a successful prosecution, and that is what I enjoy most, having successful prosecutions,” Haralson said.

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