

# HERITAGE

70/40: WORLD WAR II (1945-2015) • VIETNAM WAR (1975-2015)



## The Ghosts Of Different Wars

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The thundering, celebratory heralds have faded to whispers. The raw experiences have slipped into ancient memories. The young warriors have grown old or, with grim speed, have passed on. Seventy years on, the legacy of World War II is turning into a past tense, a tale increasingly left to be told in second-hand accounts, as matters of long-ago family history, as fragments and anecdotes left behind from a different age. For many of us too young to have experienced the World War II years ourselves but grew up in its incredible wake, this is a hard reckoning.

We came of age in a time and place when World War II veterans were everywhere, as were the ripples that emanated from that conflict. Television programs, movies and, really, are own imaginations were still dominated by the war for decades after its conclusion. The old lines of thinking were still relevant. The heroes were still newly pressed; the old demons were still vitally demonic. We still lived in a world clearly defined by the war and the post-war. When people talked about “before the war,” “during the war” and “after the war,” we knew precisely what they meant.

But we realize now more than ever before that the soldiers who fought that

fight — their experiences and their recollections — are vanishing from us. In five years, when we recognize (as we surely will) the 75th anniversary of the war’s end, there will be precious few of those soldiers left to tell us the story.

The soldiers of World War II did indeed give us a lot. One of those things was the next generation of soldiers called to war in a place known by the 1960s as Vietnam — South and North, at the time. They fought in a different kind of war and, maybe, for a different kind of America. Where we once embraced a war effort because of a sneak attack that steeled our resolve and provided clear-cut (or so it seemed) definitions of right and wrong, the Vietnam War was waged in a mangled gray area that never rallied the public’s will. When those soldiers returned, they were met with a different kind of response — some of it even scornful. The nation didn’t welcome them back as they did the World War II warriors. The Vietnam vets were relegated to an experience the rest of us wanted to sponge from our minds rather than embrace or understand.

But in many ways, there was no difference between the two generations. Young people went off to war. Fighting was fighting. Killing was killing. Dying was dying. There was heroism and there was fear. The anguish of war is universal.

Forty years ago this year, the last piece of the Vietnam War tumbled into place with the fall of Saigon and the victory of the communist north. It im-