

The Memories Of War — And The Post-War — Remain

Northeast Nebraska Veterans Had Diverse Experiences In Vietnam

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In 2008, the National Defense Authorization Act gave the Secretary of Defense the power to create a Vietnam War Commemoration program, which had five objectives: to thank and honor all Vietnam veterans; to highlight the service of the Armed Forces during the Vietnam War; to acknowledge contributions made on the home front through military research; to recognize advances in technology, science and medicine during the Vietnam War; and to remember contributions and sacrifices made by allies of the U.S. during the war.

The actual bombing of Vietnam began with hits on Hanoi in 1965, but the physical involvement started long before that. The Vietnam conflict started as early as 1950, when the U.S. started sending small arms support and eventually military advisors. From 1960-64 approximately 50,000 men served in Vietnam.

The total number of Vietnam vets which served totaled 9.7 percent of their generation. More than 8 million American GIs were in active duty from 1964-75 and 3.5 million served in the Southeast Asia Theatre. Around 7,500 women served in Vietnam, 300,000 GIs were injured and 58,000 died.

During President Lyndon B. Johnson's administration, military support and troops escalated. The peak of the war was 1969 and many northeast Nebraska natives felt the call to serve through the draft or voluntary enlistment.

For some soldiers like Dave Donner, John Merkel and Bob Suing, the war was easy — that is, as easy as war can be.

Donner enlisted in 1969 when he was 18 years old and just out of high school. After training, he was assigned as trained infantry personnel attached to the German Air Force. He was trained to operate a newly designed weapon and demonstrate it to personnel stationed in Germany.

"Although I could have reenlisted for another five years, when my time was up, I came home," said Donner. "Compared to Vietnam vets, it was a boring assignment — I like to stay busy, so I took advantage of my free time with correspondence courses." He studied soil conservation, fisheries management and wildlife management through a California-based program.

The Vietnam War for John Merkel was bolts and nuts. Merkel spent 12 months in Vietnam as a

supply clerk and a forklift driver — basic distribution.

"I didn't see any action and now, after all this time has passed, I still don't understand why we were there," he said. "I can see why we fight in Iraq because of the oil but Vietnam never made any sense to me. And when you came back, people didn't care and told you so."

Bob Suing was drafted in the first year of the lottery draft. His testing defined him as having engineering skills and was trained as a heavy equipment mechanic.

"It kept me out of the fighting," said Suing.

He was stationed at a main supply base near Saigon, which was heavily protected. He rarely went off base but had to go off base one time to recover a truck that had run into a deep ravine. Problems ensued, a cable broke and he said it was very nerve-wracking. The soldiers were always on high alert for enemy snipers but they were lucky that day. Other times, he was ordered to be a shotgun rider with a military hearse. Tracer rounds and combat helicopters in firefights haunted them every day.

Suing remembered how messed up his fellow soldiers were when they came out of combat and also due to the variety of drugs that were readily available. He said it wasn't hard to realize how serious combat situations were and what they went through, but the problems created by the drug use followed many of them their whole lives.

But Suing's worst memory was how lonely he was that first Christmas away from home. He was familiar with homesickness but he recalled being physically sick spending that holiday across the ocean in a war-torn land where fear waited behind every turn.

Donner had two brothers who served before him and were sent to Vietnam, but the three never served at the same time.

Brother Jerome volunteered for service in 1967 at age 19 and spent one year in Vietnam.

"My MOS was infantry and I saw enough fighting, at least eight months. But I wanted to stay busy, not just be on a base," Jerome said. "And yes, I have nightmares, just like my brother Bob does but I am used to them."

He saw lots of aircraft attacks and chopper interaction, but a big help was a dog who attached itself to him. The dog rode in the chopper with him and slept under his bed.

Every once in a while, Jerome thinks about someone he served with in Vietnam and wonders if they made it back home.

All in all, the war was a good experience for Jerome. He remained in the National Guard for several



PHOTOS: STEVE KEISER

These wartime images were provided by Nebraska veteran Steve Keiser. The above photo shows troops moving through a bombed-out area while on patrol. The photo below shows an enemy camp that Keiser's company had just blown up.



years and, at age 60, he talked to his supervisor about serving some time during the Iraq conflict. He had continued schooling and was considered a skilled marksman. His supervisor told him he had seen enough fighting to last a lifetime, so he only recently mustered out. He was still willing to serve. He was

raised with a dad who was a World War II veteran and learned respect for the Armed Forces. He also passed it on to two of his sons.

Jerome was proud when he and one of his sons were chosen as part of a Nebraska contingent of 40 Guardsmen who went to the 50th anniversary commemoration of the

D-Day invasion in France in 1994.

"I got to stand on the spot where my dad was wounded back in World War II on Normandy Beach," said Jerome. "The battle was all mapped out. Not many men can say that." He said he was moved by the dedications and ceremonies in France.

But the welcome-home celebrations for the Vietnam veterans were not the same.

For Darrell Wieseler, a Wynot native whose number was called in the lottery for the draft, coming home as a veteran from Vietnam was a challenge like most soldiers of that era — especially in California, where he was stationed.

"No one cared or wanted to know what happened over there or what we experienced," said Wieseler. "We were called 'baby killers' and many times you found yourself with a bunch of misfits. A common occurrence at the time was for a judge to say to a criminal in his

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network of sharpened bamboo poles tipped with highly infectious tinctures intended to quickly inflame any wounds inflicted by the sticks.

"Another common trap was a trip wire that brought sharpened bamboo around to stab you in the chest," Brinkman said. "You had to constantly be on your guard."

Throughout his 15-month service, Brinkman had leave to go to nearby towns for R-and-R, but no leave to go home.

"There were no phone calls either," Brinkman said. "Mail was pretty slow. Mom would send a coffee can with cookies every so often. Most times it was pretty much crumbs by the time I received it, but it tasted pretty good."

The platoon's limited C-rations kept hunger at bay but offered little flavor or variety.

"Much of the time, we had to treat the water before we drank it," he remembered. "You dropped that Halazone tablet in the cup, held your nose and drank it down."

One of Brinkman's friends, in an attempt to protect himself from rocket fire, climbed into a steel box that had been used to haul fuel tanks. The tactic wasn't successful. The rocket that landed squarely on the steel tank

ended the man's life.

"I found the names of a couple of friends who lost their life there," Brinkman said. "There were others who were seriously injured. I feel very fortunate that I was able to serve and return home safely."

But Brinkman's return didn't end the battle he'd experienced in Vietnam. In addition to dealing with disgruntled civilians who disapproved of the war, Brinkman learned he had some work to do in transitioning back to an everyday routine.

"One day, my mother dropped a dish," Brinkman recalled. "Instinctively, when I heard that noise, I hit the floor. She chuckled, and it was funny. But it made me realize that things were different for me after I came

home. It took several months before I was really at ease."

Brinkman also had to fight to get back into the workforce. His former employer wasn't willing to let him come back to the job he'd left. Local officials — a county commissioner and even state governmental representatives — stepped in on Brinkman's behalf, but in the end he found a new job.

"Sometimes, it seems that people who didn't serve or have a family member who served don't really comprehend the sacrifices military members make," Brinkman said. "That's especially true for those who lose limbs or have injuries that affect them the rest of their lives. We owe all members of our military the highest regard and respect."

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