

“As I listened to their stories, it seemed many of them had a real struggle when they came home from the war, finding it difficult to adjust to civilian life again. I wanted to know what their lives were like before they served and how their war experience impacted their life afterward.”

STEVE FEIMER

‘Still Coming Home’

USD Professor Compiling Book That Chronicles The Experiences And Struggles Of Vietnam Veterans

BY LORETTA SORENSEN
P&D Correspondent

It was neither intention nor passion that led Steve Feimer to develop, “Vietnam Veterans: Still Coming Home — Their Stories in Their Words,” a book-length collection of Vietnam veterans’ recollections of their war, pre-war and post-war experiences.

The life-changing opportunity presented itself to this University of South Dakota criminal justice professor after he shared his collection of veteran-related photography at a public event.

“I was putting away my camera equipment after the presentation when a member of the audience came up to me and asked if I could turn his slide collection into prints,” Feimer said. “When I asked about the content of the slides he told me they were images he had captured when he was a door gunner on a helicopter gunship during the Vietnam War. He told me, ‘I thought he was going for his gun, but I got to mine first. The jury said it was manslaughter. I thought it was self-defense.’”

Feimer subsequently learned that the man making the inquiry was a Vietnam veteran on parole after serving 13 years in the South Dakota State Penitentiary in Sioux Falls. He had shot and killed someone in a bar fight in western South Dakota shortly after returning from Vietnam.

“He had to get permission from his parole officer to give me his slides,” Feimer said. “As we scanned the 300 slides, he told me his story. He also told me there were many other veterans’ stories that I would appreciate. Each time I spoke with another veteran, it led to still another story and interview. The book is made up of 31 of those stories, as the veterans shared them and I recorded them.”

For the past five years, using his own resources, Feimer has traveled throughout the region and across the U.S. to conduct Veteran interviews. In addition to securing the “war stories,” Feimer also captured details from the men about their lives before and after their military service.

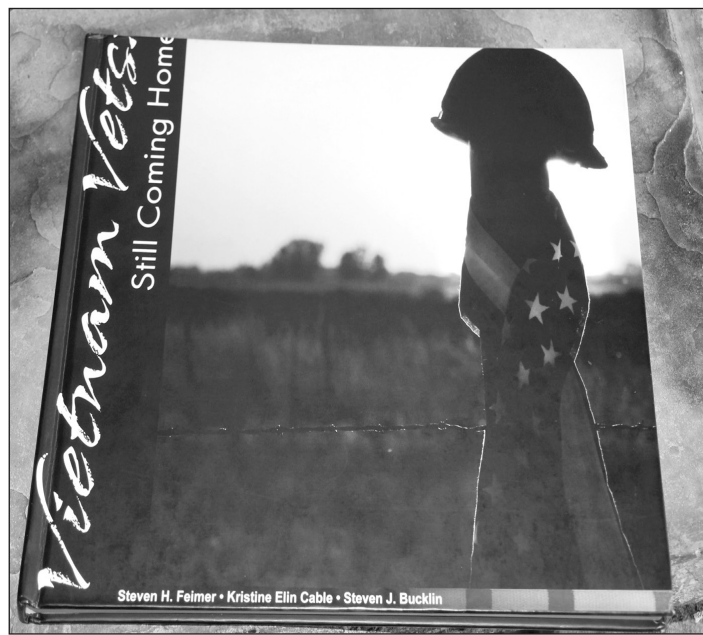
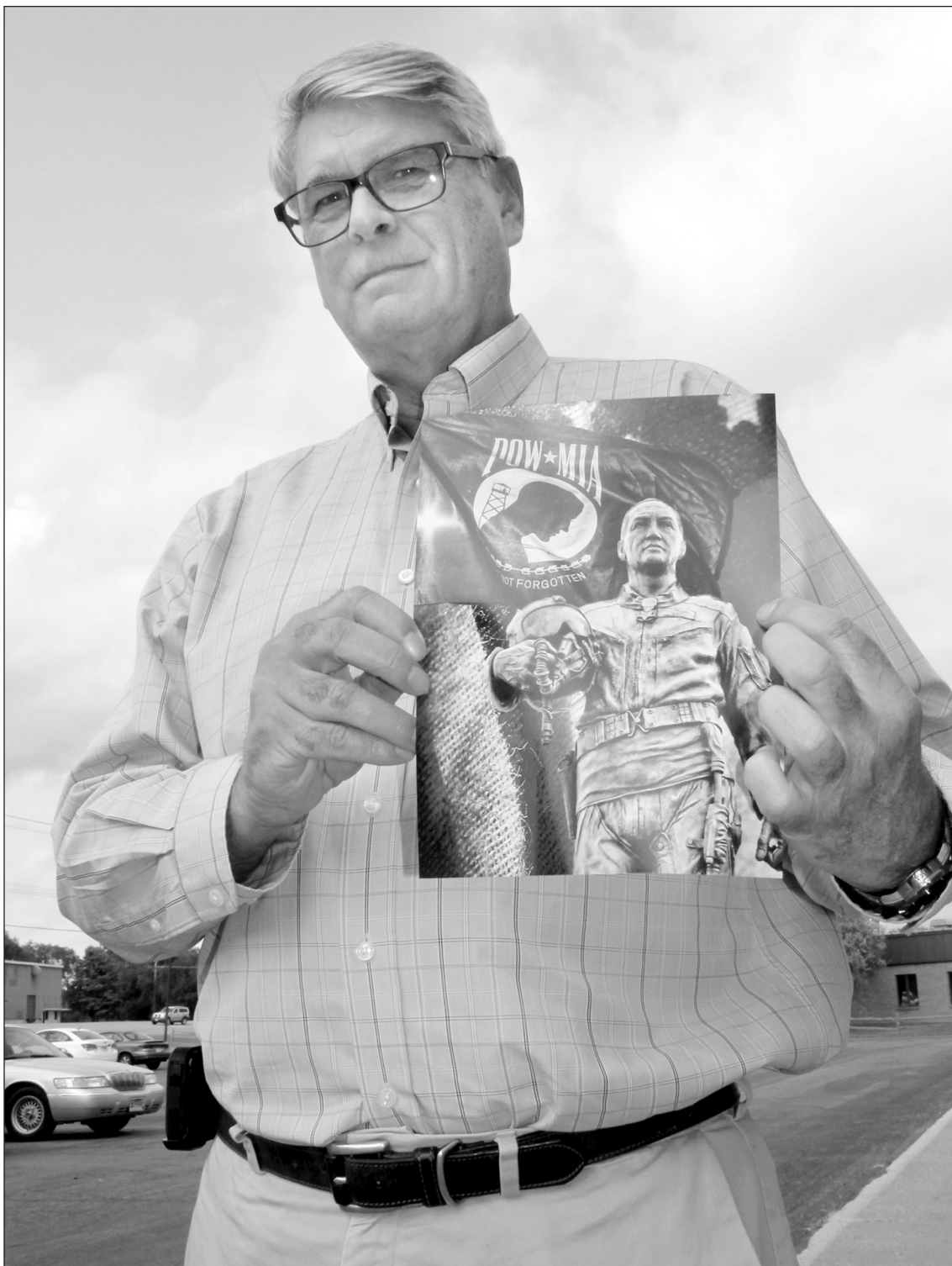
“I’m in the same age range of many of these men, I even went to high school with one of the guys I interviewed, but I didn’t go to Vietnam,” Feimer said. “As I listened to their stories, it seemed many of them had a real struggle when they came home from the war, finding it difficult to adjust to civilian life again. I wanted to know what their lives were like before they served and how their war experience impacted their life afterward.”

In gathering the articles, Feimer saw some veterans who were hesitant in relating their experiences. In face-to-face interviews, it was easy for him to recognize the deep emotion still evoked by some vivid experiences.

“There were plenty of times when they choked up, or teared up, in telling their story,” Feimer said. “There were plenty of times when they asked me to stop recording because they wanted to talk ‘off the record.’ It was clear that these men didn’t feel appreciated when they returned from the war. For many of the vets, it was hard to cope with the fact that so many of the Vietnam War casualties were children. The Vietcong were notorious for using women and children for nefarious types of operations. It was a situation of kill or be killed. For many vets, it was hard to deal with that reality.”

Survivor’s guilt was another common thread in the conversations. Leaving buddies and coming home, not knowing if those friends would survive the war, was very stressful. There were also “friendly fire” instances resulting in deaths of fellow soldiers. These cases stimulated strong guilt feelings. The adrenaline high the veterans experienced during their service in Vietnam wasn’t easy to turn off when they came home.

“The other aspect of this book is my effort to illustrate that Vietnam veterans held a lot of different jobs,” Feimer said. “They weren’t all on the front line. Many were in support positions. Vietnam soldiers did everything from serving as tunnel rats, to medics to helicopter pilots, to truck drivers and fighter pilots. Some Vietnam veterans featured in the book ended up in South Dakota after the war. Not all of the veterans in the book were from South Dakota but most were from the Midwest.”



University of South Dakota criminal justice professor Steve Feimer has written “Vietnam Veterans: Still Coming Home — Their Stories in Their Words,” a book-length compilation of recollections from Vietnam War veterans. The book delves into their thoughts and experiences before, during and after the conflict. “It’s often emotionally stressful for veterans to get through their story,” he said. “But none of them have said they regret sharing it.” (Photos : Loretta Sorensen)

Most of the veterans interviewed for the book had a collection of personal photos from their experience. Many of the pictures are used to illustrate their stories.

“Most of the vets talked about how difficult their time in Vietnam was for their mothers,” Feimer said. “Dennis Daum, who was awarded four or five Purple Hearts for his Vietnam service, has a whole collection of letters he wrote home. Some are featured in the book.”

“Not many of the vets carried cameras when they were on patrol,” Feimer adds. “Just the click of a camera could easily give away their position. Film was also highly subject to damage before it was processed. Marines especially were not likely to take photos during their service.”

In his research and writing, it occurred to Feimer that the return process for Vietnam veterans was quite different from that of World War II soldiers. As World War II drew to a close, many soldiers returned home in groups and it took time for them to reach the States before finally reaching home.

“For Vietnam veterans, 24 to 48 hours after they were in combat, they could be back home and on a tractor,” Feimer says. “Few made an effort to visit them and see how they were doing, if they were adjusting well. There are always experiences veterans of any war don’t want to remember. But there’s urgency to capturing these personal stories, especially for those dealing with the effects of Agent Orange. If their stories aren’t recorded now, they may never be.”

Included in the Veterans’ interviews are their perspectives on parallels between the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, how the wars are different and how they’re alike. Of the 31 veterans interviewed, four have passed away, and three of the deceased were dealing with Agent Orange-related diseases. One or two of the veterans Feimer contacted declined the offer to share their stories.

“The difficult part of this project for me has been the page limitation the book imposes,” Feimer said. “You could easily fill thousands of pages with all the

different stories, but that isn’t feasible.”

Feimer points to www.veteranstalk.com as an ongoing source of veterans’ personal war reflections. Vietnam veteran Jim Lytner developed the website after starting “The Forgotten Promise” radio show in 2010 in an effort to educate the public with issues veterans face when returning from active duty. R.J. Dough and Dixie Thompson also contribute to the website where veterans’ stories are regularly updated.

Feimer’s last interview, a veteran in Florida, is being transcribed and readied for inclusion in the book.

“I’ve provided my digital interviews to a writer in Des Moines, Iowa, who has turned the interviews into articles,” Feimer says. “We have a prototype of the book, so people can see what the end product will look like. But we’re still searching for a publisher. All proceeds will go to a Disabled Veterans organization. We will have a fulfillment agent take and fulfill orders, but we aren’t sure yet what all of that looks like.”

Although he’s developed numerous scholarly articles for journals, this is Feimer’s first book. He hopes to see it in print within six months or less.

What is likely to lead to his second book project is the drive to share stories from more recent wars.

“For me, it seems getting these stories into the hands of others is the least I can do for them, a way to give back,” he said. “It’s my demonstration of gratitude for their service. Any funds generated will go back to them. We have some financial backing from the USD Chiesman Fund (Rapid City) and some private donors. I’ve covered all my own expenses.

“I’m considering capturing the stories of veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars,” Feimer added. “I have the easy part of the project: asking questions. It’s often emotionally stressful for veterans to get through their story. But none of them have said they regret sharing it.”

Feimer can be contacted at 605-677-6468 or sfeimer@usd.edu.



Kevin Guthmiller

AGENCY

Your Independent Agent

AUTO • HOME • LIFE • HEALTH • COMMERCIAL

605-665-4230 800-477-2765

1818 Broadway Ave., Suite 6, Yankton, SD

kgagency@iw.net

