

H O M E C O M I N G

Viet Nam Vets receive a long awaited "Welcome Home."

By Glenna Grey



THE PLANE WAS SILENT on the way home from Vietnam, in stark contrast to the exuberant commotion there had been a year earlier, on the way to war. A year of lessons learned the hard way. A year facing death and "the beast" in yourself and those around you takes a heavy toll.

"Welcome home!" This is the greeting you would expect to hear when you get off the plane. But what local Vietnam veterans had hurled at them was, "Baby killer!" The veterans who returned from that war were too often met with hostility, hatred and silence. A group of local community members created an event recently to try to begin to heal the results of that treatment, for North Tillamook County veterans at least, on Thursday evening, July 2 at the Pine Grove Community Center.

Organizers Darel and Ann Grothaus, Tom Bender, Stefan Malecek, Gary Ward, Maia Holliday, and Beth Messinger brought the community and Vietnam veterans to the Pine Grove Community Center in Manzanita to begin the process of breaking that silence and exploring what war does to the soldiers and the communities they come from in an event they called, "Homecoming." Of the 30 or so people in attendance, some were vets, some came who had lost friends or loved ones during the Viet Nam War, some came seeking relief from the pain of the memories of those years.

The Viet Nam War was the longest war in U.S. history. "War" was never officially declared by the United States. Cornell University placed the overall cost of the war at \$200 billion. Bomb tonnage dropped during the Viet Nam War totaled 1,000 lbs. for every man, woman, and child in Viet Nam. An estimated 3 million people were killed by the war, and over 1 million were wounded.

Inside the large community circle, the veterans moved chairs into an inner circle as they told their stories around a candle filled altar. Originally four, and eventually seven veterans from various branches of the service shared their stories of that time.

Some commonalities emerged from the vet's stories. The average age when they arrived in Viet Nam was 20. Several were wounded, some several times. Several earned Purple Hearts. All

expressed a sense of shock at the conditions of war and realized how ill-prepared they were to do the job they were ordered to do. A sense of "culture shock" pervaded. Many were attacked even before they had been issued weapons. All saw friends die or horribly wounded. Agent Orange had its effects on the men and the land.

Most have spent their time and energy since they returned in helping professions. Stephan Malecek is a psychotherapist; Ken Rislow spent many years working for Child Protective Services; Bob White was a clinical social worker. These men managed to find constructive ways to use their energies. Ray Shackelford has been building schools and an orphanage in Cambodia. One of those schools still has a 50 foot crater from a bomb next to it. "I hope to see it turn into a park one day," he said. According to Vietnam Veterans of America, as many as 60,000 Viet Nam vets

could not get beyond the pain and ended their own lives.

Tim Hayes of Tillamook was 25 when he first saw Viet Nam. Many of the lessons he learned were painful, and were often echoed by the other vets during the evening. One lesson Tim learned was the process of learning to rely on people. "You learned to rely on the men in your unit. You trusted each other and got very close, your lives were in each other's hands. I experienced love in a way I'd never experienced before. Life is sacred." He was shocked at how quickly his personality changed. "I became a hunter. It scarred my soul. My heart turned to stone. I found out what was to be a human being, and what it is to hate." Nguyen Trung also attended the event, not because she is a vet, but because she was a translator between the Vietnamese generals and the American generals. She asserts, "War is senseless, war is like a game world leaders play, and we are their pawns. When will it change? We need to be at peace with ourselves and each other." The veterans at the event welcomed her into the inner circle.

After the vets spoke, local singer Maia Holliday sang "The Fiddle and the Drum" written by Joni Mitchell. A reading from "The Boys" taken from In Country, by Michael Andrews and read

by Michael Hithe, followed.

The evening culminated in a Native American Welcoming ceremony. The veterans walked between two rows of community members who welcomed each veteran home. Then each vet was given a blanket created by Pendleton Woolen Mills which represents, according to their website: "The fabric of our nation that is woven with the sacrifices of our veterans. In recognition of selfless sacrifice, the 'Grateful Nation' blanket honors the brave men and women who have defended freedom throughout the history of the United States of America."

Tim Hayes spoke of a black box where soldiers store up the pain, the memories and the shock of their war experiences. Then they carry it around the rest of their lives. They think that if they open the black box, they will go crazy. Tim asserts that the work of healing is in that black box. By gathering the courage to open the box, they find a baby sleeping, their own inner child. He says, "You have to do the work to heal."

At the end of the evening, after sharing food, the consensus was, "The main value of this night is that all of us are witnessing that we are a healing community."

If you would like to create your own healing ceremony for Vietnam or other vets or for further information, contact Tom Bender at tbender@nehalemtnet.net.



VETS IN ATTENDANCE

BOB WHITE/Army/helicopter maintenance. Bob suffered the physical and emotional effects of Agent Orange. Attacked one hour after arriving in Vietnam. Became a clinical social worker. "I see today, history repeating itself."

STEFAN MALECEK/Army/initially in the 85th Evac hospital, then the 14th General Dispensary in Qui Nhon. Then Phu Bai then LZ Sally and finally "C" Company, 326 Medical Battalion 101st Airborne. Became a psychotherapist. May 5, he is 40 years home.

RAY SHAKELFORD/1st Cav Div. Airmobile/district senior advisor with cords in Xuyen Moc Province, Phouc Tuy Province, Battalion senior advisor to the 52nd ARVN artillery. Advised regional and popular forces on special warfare and the use of artillery. "My experiences there in Vietnam and when we went into Cambodia are part of the reason for my school projects, and the orphanage in Cambodia now."

MICHAEL HITHE/Army/1st Division, Communications. "I faced death and came to grips with that. Facing your mortality makes you fatalistic."

KEN RISLOW/Navy, USS Intrepid. "Saigon was 1001 shades of green. I asked myself, 'What are we doing here?' The Vietnamese people are very nice people, People are all the same: the good the bad, and the ugly. We were not only victims, we were sacrifices."

FRED LACKAFF/Coast Guard. Played music at war protests stateside.