

From the Editor's Desk: A long-delayed welcome

Contributed by Elizabeth Larson
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Sometimes it's the smallest gestures that, ultimately, give the most meaning to our lives, and have the greatest impact on the lives we touch.

One of those small gestures we too often dismiss is the simple act of saying "thank you." And, yet, for some people, hearing those words can make all the difference.

Today, March 30, is an important day to think about not just saying "thank you" but also "welcome home" to our Vietnam veterans. That's because this is the inaugural "Welcome Home Vietnam Veterans Day," approved by resolutions of both houses of Congress last year.

Thirty-five years ago on this date, the US finalized its pullout of combat troops from Vietnam, after more than a decade of US presence in that country, eight of those years engaged in combat that resulted in more than 58,000 deaths and 300,000 casualties among US Armed Forces members. More than 1,700 soldiers are still missing in action from that war.

Whether or not we'll ever have a truly accurate count of that war's walking wounded — the men and women who came home with post traumatic stress disorder, other mental health issues and drug problems — may never be known.

Believe it or not, many of the men and women who served in Vietnam have never had anyone thank them for their service, or felt really welcome home to the country they served.

I've talked to many veterans about what they encountered when they came home. It ranges from indifference from friends and family, to physical attacks and taunting by those who disagreed with the war.

I also have some personal interest in the subject. My own uncle, Darrel Gray, was a Green Beret in Vietnam, a winner of the Bronze Star for Valor, wounded or injured five times, and a victim of Agent Orange exposure, all in the space of one year, 1968.

The son of a World War II vet and great-grandson of a Confederate soldier, he had been in the Army for years by the time he landed in Vietnam.

Now in his early 60s, my uncle still suffers from the effects of post traumatic stress disorder, hearing loss, a body ravaged by the impacts of old wounds and the rigors of his service. Not only did he encounter a bad reception in the US, but an ongoing battle with the Veterans Administration, which didn't want to recognize Agent Orange exposure as a health issue.

Luckily, he had a family who loved and respected him to come home to when his service was up. Personally, I always looked on him with awe. He was my fun uncle, a man who never let on to how much he truly was suffering.

Between my uncle and Dean Gotham, I've learned a lot about the trials of Vietnam veterans.

Gotham is one person who I think should rightfully be called a local hero because of his efforts to reach out to fellow veterans and the community on the many issues Vietnam veterans still face — besides just being an all-around good guy. Quite frankly, his whole chapter is filled with good guys, good gals and heroes.

He's president of Lake County's Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter 951, and he and chapter members worked over the weekend to bring attention to veterans issues and this new day of remembrance through the first-ever sales locally of Agent Orange and POW/MIA clovers.

It was tough duty, standing outside in cold weather, but Gotham joked that he'd had tougher perimeter watch while in Vietnam.

Gotham is an expert at spotting fellow Vietnam vets, many of whom still wear their service as a badge of shame.

As I stood talking to him outside of Bruno's Shop Smart on Friday, a man came up to make a donation and Gotham handed him clovers. Shaking the man's hand, Gotham asked him if he was a Vietnam vet and the man said, somewhat abashedly, that he was.

Gotham said he can recognize Vietnam vets because of the "faraway look" in their eyes.

The more cynical among us might suggest that a welcome home celebration today, so many years shamefully overdue, can't make a difference.

But, I disagree. I think it's a start.

Today should be a day of healing for our vets, and gratitude from the rest of us because they did the frightening work while we enjoyed life at home. They kept the watches through the night and guarded the perimeters to protect their country, even though they were thousands of miles away.

The fact that we're coming full circle, that today you find people who are opposed to the Iraq War yet who still are careful to pay respect to the soldiers who are doing their job, is — I believe — thanks to the lobbying over the last three decades by Vietnam veterans.

In fact, Vietnam Veterans of America have as their motto, "Never again will one generation of veterans abandon another." Many local vets affiliated with the local Vietnam Veterans of America have worked hard to look out for young vets coming home from Iraq and Afghanistan.

Welcome Home Vietnam Veterans Day day isn't yet a national holiday, but it should be. It's the least we can do in an effort to repair the hurt suffered by the men and women who have waited to be welcomed home all these years.

Likewise, it's a reminder of the path we've traveled, and the course we shouldn't ever follow again.

Some moments in our national history will always be a source of pain and division. The Vietnam War is one of them. But the disagreement and pain of that division should no longer rest on the shoulders of the soldiers who went to serve. It's their time to rest.

To our veterans: Thank you for your service. Welcome home. What you did mattered and it won't be forgotten.
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