

# Vietnam vets share at Fishtrap event

By Steve Tool

Wallowa County Chieftain

It was standing room only at Fishtrap's second Big Read event Thursday night, Jan. 19, at the Tomas Building conference room.

Fishtrap titled the event: What Vietnam Teaches Us: Wallowa County Veterans Discuss The Things They Carried. The 2017 Big Read book is Tim O'Brien's Vietnam War classic "The Things They Carried."

Local veterans Dennis Sheehy, Steve Rubin and Jose McCormack spent the evening answering questions from moderator Miles McFall and the audience about their war experiences.

The three veterans and McFall sat in a row facing the audience for the duration of the evening. Sheehy joined the Marine Corps in 1966 and went to Vietnam in March 1967. Originally an infantryman/rifleman, he became a radio operator. He left Vietnam in June 1967 when he was wounded. After spending some time in a naval hospital he left the Corps in 1968.



Steve Tool/Chieftain

Thursday's Big Read event featured several Wallowa County veterans discussing their Vietnam experience with an audience and moderator Miles McFall. L to R: Miles McFall, Marine Corps veteran Dennis Sheehy, Navy Steve Rubin and Marine Corps veteran Jose McCormack.

Steve Rubin served in the U.S. Navy as a doctor from 1973-1975. He did two tours off the coasts of Vietnam and Cambodia.

Joe McCormack enlisted in the Marines in 1967 at 17. Originally trained as an 81 and 60 millimeter mortar man, McCormack went to Vietnam in 1968 and was retrained as a forward observer as well as forward air controller and forward naval gun controller and

artillery forward observer. He left Vietnam in 1969 and was honorably discharged in 1970.

McFall is a retired clinical psychologist who worked for the Department of Veterans Affairs for many years.

The first question McFall asked were the men's overall impression of O'Brien's book and what they liked and didn't like about it. Rubin thought the most important part of the book was preservation of the

memory, of the fallen.

"The fact is, he was reminding us not to forget," Rubin said. He liked the book and thought it well-written.

McCormack also thought the book interesting. "It's very interesting to read someone's perspective on human idiosyncrasies, and how he was able to manufacture the personalities of the people he wrote about." He added that he wasn't sure why the book was studied so heavily.

Sheehy said he didn't like the book at all, save the first chapter. Apart from not liking novels to begin with, Sheehy said the writing style of the war sections changed significantly from when the author was telling a true story or a fabrication.

McFall also asked the three how the war changed their perspective on themselves, others or the world. Sheehy said the war changed his perspective on what he wanted to do when he got out. Previously a borderline student, Sheehy knuckled down after his war stint.

"Even to the point of becoming a professional stu-

dent," he said with a laugh.

On the negative side, Sheehy said he lost confidence in both the media and politicians, which persists to this day.

Rubin said the war gave him the impetus to study in college, so wouldn't get drafted. On the negative side, "I saw there was significant (racial) prejudice. I thought that was settled a long time ago," he said.

McCormack said he had been drifting in high school when he volunteered.

"When I was in, I developed a good sense of direction that was pleasing to me. There was room for promotion and that sort of thing. You could excel and that felt good," he said. He added that the war did give him an anger problem that he's learned to control over the years as well as a distrust of politicians.

When it came to offering advice for returning Iraq and Afghanistan veterans, McCormack advised that they learn to turn off memories, which can trigger PTSD episodes.

"You have to train your mind to look at the brighter side of life in that moment,"

McCormack said.

All the men recommended seeking out fellow veterans in outreach groups with Divide Camp mentioned by Joe McCormack. They also said that being treated well by the community meant more than a "Thank you for your service."

Their service had pleasurable times as well. Both McCormack and Sheehy remembered fishing with hand grenades in the same lake, though at different times.

At the end of the session the three briefly took audience questions about which books about Vietnam they recommended and answered in the affirmative when asked if their service influenced their career choices.

As the crowd wound down, Sheehy said he had only hesitated a little when asked to participate and hadn't come to the forum with any expectations.

"I think it went pretty well," Sheehy said.

McFall said that he was very pleased with the crowd size and the way it embraced the topic rather than shied away from it.

## MARCH

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Shortly after 1 p.m. marchers filed from the parking lot along a route that led down North Lake Street, two blocks to East Williams Avenue and across Main Street, being careful to cause as little traffic disruption as possible. Turning north the marchers traveled to East Maple Street while many cars honked while shouting approval. After re-crossing Main Street the long line traveled to the Jennings Hotel lobby where hot chocolate and snacks awaited the jubilant marchers.

The marchers filled the hotel lobby where several of the event organizers including lead organizer Sarah Lynch stood atop the counter to address the crowd, congratulating them for their participation and urging more political activism to ensure their voices be present in the political process. Many marchers also wrote about their experiences on the lobby's papered walls.

Lynch said a local march was suggested at this month's Wallowa County Democrats meeting because many local

women wanted to attend a march but did not want to travel. To that end, a group of local women, not all from the local Democratic Committee, set the wheels turning for a local march.

"The event was not difficult to organize and it was done in under 2 weeks with local activists and businesses rallying together to quickly organize a wonderful event," she said.

All of the marchers the Chieftain interviewed said they were surprised at the turnout size as well as the spirit and joy emanating from fellow marchers.

Heidi Muller said she marched, in part, to let members of the community in ethnic, religious, sexual preference or gender minorities to know they have allies standing behind them.

"I did so because the new administration is poised to take action to dismantle much of the good that I think has been achieved over the course of my lifetime, and I do not want to be complicit in actions I think are harmful for people and our planet," she said.

Wallowa resident Katy Madrid described herself as a very political person who planned to

attend the march in either Boise or Portland, when a friend told her about the Joseph march.

"I think it's a very critical time to be counted, and to get and stay involved ... I hope we use this momentum to stay connected and heard in future years," she said.

Many men joined the march, Mark Lacey among them. Like Muller, the Joseph resident marched to ensure that advances in human rights over the last several decades remain in place. Lacey appreciated the civility of the march as well as the large numbers of families that participated.

"I think the march, in solidarity with other marches around the world is the beginning to keep pressure on our elected representatives," he said. "If they do not respond appropriately, they're going to be out of office."

Robin Martin, a resident of Joseph, said she marched to protect the environment and be encouraged by others to not be afraid to stand up for what she believes. Martin was happy seeing her community pull together in solidarity and love. As a cancer survivor able to afford private health insurance, Martin said she marched for

those who can't afford or are unable otherwise to get health insurance as well as reproductive rights.

"I cherish the right to make choices without government interference," she said. "I marched because I remember myself as a young woman entering Planned Parenthood for the first time to receive my first birth control. I am blessed to live in Wallowa County and know we'll remain strong together."

Lynch said she expects the marches to have an impact

globally as well as locally. She said that one marcher told her she no longer feels invisible while another who hadn't planned to march but did, now sees her community differently. Lynch saw hope for the future.

"What I saw happening in the days leading up to the march and 48 hours, it seems

like people are using the march as a stepping off point to further organize and decide how they're going to respond to the country's current leadership," Lynch said. "They're not going to be comfortable sitting on the sidelines, and that message is definitely resounding across the nation and around the world."

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