

VETERANS from page 1A

American involvement in the controversial Vietnam war began in 1955, continuing until 1975. The two countries resumed formal diplomatic relations in 1995 and are currently strong trade partners; relations between the two former adversaries is good.

Primarily a proxy war between the United States and China, the conflict in Southeast Asia took the lives of nearly 60,000 American soldiers, an estimated 1 million North Vietnamese and Viet Cong fighters, and 2 million civilians.

The impact of the Vietnam War in the U.S. was dramatic. Many younger people and college students protested openly against the war and, by extension, America's foreign policy.

There was also major urban unrest, partially fueled by the

assumption that residents from minority neighborhoods were being disproportionately drafted to serve in Vietnam. This civil unrest created an environment that penalized those that served for what many considered an unjust war.

Many returning veterans were traumatized by the violence experienced in Southeast Asia only to have the reception at home add insult to injury.

Jerry Hernandez, the spokesperson for the Florence Chapter of the Disabled American Veterans (DAV), volunteered for the army while still in high school with no knowledge of what he was getting himself into.

"For me it started in 1965, when I joined the service just before I turned 18. I was young and really didn't know what was going on," he said. "My friends said they were joining the service

and I said, 'You guys aren't going without me.' My mom had to sign for me. She didn't like it, but honestly I didn't realize what was going over there."

Hernandez went to Vietnam with the 25th Infantry Division and to a place called Cu Chi as a demolition expert.

"Back then I was 5'4" and weighed 138 pounds, so I became a tunnel rat," he explained. "I crawled around in tunnels and blew up bridges and mines and lots of other stuff."

The idea that 17- and 18-year-olds would be heavily involved in the violence that accompanies military action is a common thread in the stories of local veterans. Another commonality that Hernandez pointed out is the response he received from his fellow Americans.

"Everyone in my family and my friends were proud, but outside of my home it was bad. I didn't go out and talk about it," he recalled. "We didn't wear clothing or memorabilia and we didn't talk to people about what we had done."

Jim Swantz is a Senior Vice Commander for Veterans of Foreign Wars Post No.3232 in Florence and is active in groups that support veterans. He also volunteered to serve as a young

man.

"I, too, went in when I was 17. My parents had to sign for me and the only reason they agreed was they didn't think I'd pass the physical," Swantz said with a chuckle. "I was in the Security Service. I flew over 100 missions. ... We were flying C-130's for recon and had equipment on board that allowed 50 operators sitting in Thailand to monitor activity in Laos, Cambodia and North Vietnam."

Swantz remembers returning to California from Southeast Asia and being spit on and sworn at by people protesting the war. The response he receives now is thankfully quite the opposite.

"It's entirely different now. Even young kids come up and thank you for your service. Every day it seems like someone will come up and thank me. It is really amazing," he said.

Hernandez said he feels the pain associated with losing friends was something that he

just chose to not deal with at the time, primarily because he just wasn't ready to talk about his time in the war.

"I lost some friends there and a lot of that I shut out. I don't remember names, but I remember faces — and most of the bad I just shut out," Hernandez said, pausing to gather himself. "I did experience some really bad things. But to me, they don't seem that bad because I know a lot of other guys that experienced a lot worse than I did."

The emotional damage suffered by Vietnam veterans was not confined to those who actually served in Vietnam. Those who served stateside in a support capacity also received hate and derision as a reward for their service.

Steve Baggins, also involved with the DAV, said that although he was first ordered to Vietnam, he was redirected and stationed in Texas.

"We weren't treated well after the war, regardless of where

we served. A lot of people were against the war and it was reflected in the way they were treated when they got back, or when people got out of the service," he said.

Baggins also is pleased that the public's understanding of the necessary role fighting soldiers play in any war demands respect for the individuals that served.

"Now it's totally different, and the people that served and lost their lives are finally getting their due," he said.

There is no question that the visit of the traveling Vietnam Veterans Memorial, which remained through Sunday, presented residents and veterans the chance to revisit one of the most difficult times in America's history.

Baggins captured the differences between the time after the war and the respect given now to all veterans: "I thought about your question of what the wall means to me. One word: acceptance."



MARK BRENNAN/SIUSLAW NEWS

These Vietnam-era veterans from the Siuslaw region visited the traveling Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall when it visited Florence last week.

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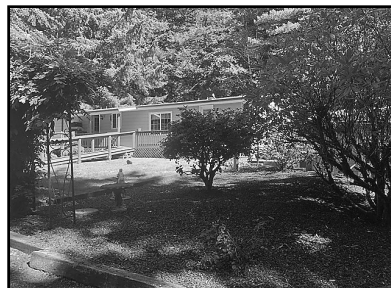


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theory is that when the base level of those needs aren't met, a person cannot address higher needs — which are in ascending order: safety, love and belonging, esteem and self-actualization.

"The most common mental illness that we see in the homeless population is PTSD, depression and anxiety," said Cherryholmes. "Imagine being stuck outside with nothing to eat, no safe place to sleep and the inability to keep clean. Could you possibly stay optimistic like that?"

In a fact sheet released by the National Health Care for the Homeless Council in May 2018, "Sixty-eight percent of homeless individuals reported that they had experienced psychological distress in the past month. These health issues are exacerbated by exposure to the elements, heightened risk of violence through physical and sexual abuse and a fragmented health system with restrictions on how and to whom care is delivered, which can lead to hopelessness, distrust, misuse of emergency services and self-treatment."

The fact sheet went on to explain that under those conditions, which already increase the likelihood of suicide in the general population, the compounding factors associated

with homelessness place those individuals at much higher risk of suicide.

In Lincoln County, for example, homelessness and a lack of affordable housing is a regular topic of discussion among community groups, at city council meetings and at the county government level — Lincoln County also holds the fourth-highest suicide rate in Oregon. The key to alleviating these pressures is individual support and more access to resources.

The 2018 Lincoln County Community Health Assessment lists five main factors that can buffer individuals from suicidal thoughts and behavior: effective clinical care, easy access to a variety of clinical interventions and support, family and community support, support from ongoing medical and mental health care relationships and skills in non-violent problem solving and conflict resolution.

The theme running through these factors is support: support from the health care system and from an individual's community. The stigma around homelessness in addition to the stigma around mental illness can be paralyzing, while support for individuals facing these experiences can be the guiding hand forward — and away from irreversible action.

"I think, as a community, we can do a better job at talking about it, too," said Benson-Arb. "We can talk about the elderly person who has had a full life and takes their life, but it's hard to bring up suicide with kids, teens — so we don't ask ... and I think we continue to stigmatize it when we don't use plain language."

On an individual level, education and action are the most direct ways to make change within a community; taking a mental first-aid or suicide prevention class, volunteering with warming shelters and donating clothes or funds to local organizations or DHS programs can all make a difference, as can reaching out to struggling family, friends and frequently seen faces.

Supporting affordable housing efforts and volunteering with organizations such as Habitat for Humanity can also help get more people into homes, providing more stability for families and individuals who are at risk by helping them acquire the most basic human needs identified in Maslow's Hierarchy.

For a list of mental health resources in Western Lane County, visit www.lanecounty.org/residents/health_and_wellness.