

Van Voorhis earned Purple Heart in Vietnam

Veteran says country was vastly different when he returned

By Steven Mitchell
Blue Mountain Eagle

Bob Van Voorhis, who volunteered for the draft in 1966 after graduating from Grant Union High School, said there was never a question in his mind, or anyone else’s in his graduating class, about volunteering for the Vietnam War. He said it’s a county tradition to serve the country. Van Voorhis said he has not seen the tradition change over the years. His childhood friend Ab Bezona told him he got his notice to get his physical one weekend in December and that Van Voorhis should go with him to the draft board, which was at the Grant County Courthouse.

“It sounded like a good idea,” he said. “December was colder than hell working in the timber industry. That’s not a lot of fun.”

Van Voorhis and Bezona were at the courthouse that Monday with another childhood friend Tom Skiens.

Altogether Grant County sent six people in the draft to the Boise induction center, according to Van Voorhis.

By early January of 1967 the six of them were in basic training in Fort Lewis.

“We had a great county flavor in the basic training company,” Van Voorhis said.

After boot camp Van Voorhis went on to officer training and was selected to the Honor Guard where he was a funeral escort.

Van Voorhis, who had just turned 19, said the guard was doing up to 10 funerals a day, and it started to take an emotional toll.

He said he asked to be transferred after a young widow of a fallen soldier threw herself on her husband’s coffin while her two young daughters looked on in tears.

“She falls on the coffin, and there’s two little girls staring at my soul with little tears,” he said.

Van Voorhis said it took his sergeant three weeks to take him seriously because servicemen did not volunteer out of that kind of duty to “wade in the mud in Vietnam.”

His orders came through in November of 1968, and he served 11 months and 28 days, he said.

Van Voorhis said the rotation system in Vietnam was one of the many differences between World War II and Vietnam.

“In the Second World War, it was for the duration,” he said. “If you’re Army infantry you’re in a war until you’re either dead or the war is over.”



Bob Van Voorhis in Vietnam.

Contributed photo

Van Voorhis, who earned a Purple Heart, took shrapnel in the arm when his platoon was attacked.

With paperwork that cleared him to go home, Van Voorhis said he had the doctor bandage him up and prescribe him a bottle of painkillers for his flight back to San Francisco.

Van Voorhis said the country was vastly different in 1968.

“What this country was like when I left was not the same as when I came home,” he said.

He said the changes went beyond the Vietnam War and the antiwar sentiments. Change, he said, that was for the better.

“In my generation, we were watching the desegregation of schools for example down in Alabama and Arkansas,” he said.

Van Voorhis said, when he got to the Veterans Hospital in Portland in his “brand new greens,” he heard from WWII veterans that Vietnam was not a “real war.”

“God bless them,” he said. “I have tremendous respect.”

He said, however, the enemy in Vietnam was using “real bullets.”

“I kind of think that qualifies as being a real war,” he said. “This was a real difference between the Second World War vets and the Vietnam War.”

‘I’VE BEEN SHOT AT ENOUGH’

Friese recalls fighting in Vietnam and other battles at home

By Steven Mitchell
Blue Mountain Eagle

Most American service members who fought in Vietnam were not like their forebears who volunteered to fight the Axis powers after Japan attacked Pearl Harbor.

Soldiers who fought in Vietnam were called upon to stop the spread of communism in southeastern Asia after the Vietnamese nationalist forces took over the country’s northern part.

Richard Friese, the son of a World War II veteran, enlisted in the Navy with the hope of staying in for six years and serving in the nuclear submarine program.

Friese said the extent of his conversation with his father about WWII was about the minesweeper boat. He said his father operated one as well that had been equipped for the ocean. Beyond that, he said, his father, like many WWII veterans, did not talk about the war.

The WWII veterans sometimes referred to as the “greatest generation” were told to get a job, raise a family and forget what happened, according to Dr. Edgardo Padin-Rivera, chief of psychology at Louis Stokes Veterans Affairs Medical Center.

During WWII, dubbed the “good war” by author Studs Terkel, the public’s general sentiment was that the returning servicemen were justified in how they carried out combat.

For returning Vietnam veterans, it was different, especially after the Tet Offensive in 1968, a series of surprise attacks on U.S. and South Vietnamese forces, and the My Lai massacre, the slaughter of roughly 500 people in the village of My Lai



The Eagle/Steven Mitchell
Richard Friese, the son of a World War II veteran, served four years in the Navy on a riverboat during Vietnam. He said his father, like many returning WWII veterans, never talked about the war.

by a company of American soldiers.

The impact of both events fueled the anti-war fervor and contempt toward returning soldiers. From being spat on to being called “baby killer,” Vietnam veterans returned to an angry, divided country.

While there was no justification for the My Lai massacre, most people did not take into account the complexity and constant hyper-vigilance involved in a soldier surviving guerilla war.

“My generation’s treatment of me when I got home did more to fuel my (post-traumatic stress disorder) than the war,” Friese said.

In contrast to WWII, the battle lines in Vietnam were

not clear, he said.

“Most of the people, they were fighting were in uniform, and you could tell one person from the other,” Friese said. “In Vietnam, you knew who you were shooting at, and you did not know who the enemy was.”

Regardless of when, where or who he was with, he was constantly on duty.

“Unless you were up by the (demilitarized zone) in South Vietnam,” he said. “Most of the battles were fought in that situation.”

Friese, who got out of Vietnam in 1971, said he had the option to reenlist.

“I told my commanding officer, ‘No, you don’t have enough money,’” he said. “I’ve been shot at enough.”



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