

Vietnamese praise
'hero' for his help
- Page 3



Diocesan members
pursue vocations
- After Page 6



Parenting: A child
deals with death
- Page 12



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Vietnam 25 years later



Vietnam veteran J. Max Lill walks among tributes to soldiers killed in the Vietnam War at the Rochester Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

The soldiers' stories

More than a generation has passed, but the Vietnam War memories of two Army infantrymen are as fresh as the blood that spilled around them.

Gary Beikirch walks with a limp and has chronic back pain from injuries suffered during a 1970 battle. Yet his greatest hurt — the knowledge of having killed others and witnessed the deaths of his comrades — is just as strong though not as noticeable.

"The emotional pain is still there every day," admitted Beikirch, 50, the Rochester area's only living Congressional Medal of Honor recipient from Vietnam.

Meanwhile, J. Max Lill cannot walk through the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial in Rochester without getting choked up.

"I get overwhelmed," said Lill, 51, as his eyes filled with tears during a recent visit to the memorial. "This is so sensitive a thing."

On Jan. 27, our nation will mark the 25th anniversary of its formal withdrawal from the Vietnam War. And although veterans interviewed for this story have found different ways to get on with their lives, their memories remain vivid.

"We still remember it just like it happened yesterday. A lot of killing, a lot of destruction," said Minh Dao, 68, a former South Vietnamese lieutenant colonel. He has resided in the United States since 1975 and in Rochester since 1980.

The United States fought in Vietnam from 1964 until the 1973 cease-fire. Approximately 58,000 American military — and several hundred thousand more Vietnamese soldiers and civilians — died in a conflict that ultimately failed to stop the spread of communist rule into South Vietnam.

Two years after the United States removed the last of its troops, the communist forces captured South Vietnam. Today, all of Vietnam remains a communist nation.

Grim realities

Initially, Lill said, he couldn't wait to get to the war. He enlisted in the army in 1966 at the age of 18, and arrived in Vietnam the following year.

Continued on page 10

Story by Mike Latona
Photograph by Greg Francis