

Vietnam

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"You're so naive. You have no idea what it's going to be like," said Lill, who attends Rochester's Corpus Christi Church.

As a sergeant in the Army's First Infantry Division, Lill said he was involved in "some major operations" near the Ho Chi Minh Trail that involved considerable death and casualties.

"You see some horrendous things. I know what it's like when someone is trying to shoot at you and kill you," Lill said.

Larry Feasel, a first lieutenant in the Army's Fourth Infantry Division, was involved in four major operations in the South Vietnamese Central Highlands during 1966 and 1967.

"We worked very close to the front line. We lived in armored vests — that was the reality of life," said Feasel, 55, from St. Joseph's Church in Penfield.

Yet many soldiers remained eager to serve, according to Barry Culhane, an Army medic who tended wounded soldiers at Fort Sam Houston, Texas, and Fort Dix, N.J., from 1969 to 1971.

"There were a lot of guys who volunteered to go back," said Culhane, 51, from Our Lady of Lourdes Church in Brighton.

One person with this kind of zeal was Beikirch, an Army Special Forces medic who was anxious to be near the action.

The sergeant got his wish — but his last battle in Vietnam almost cost him his life.

In April 1970, Beikirch was stationed in the South Vietnamese camp of Dak Seang when the Viet Cong launched a vicious siege. Beikirch scrambled desperately to give medical aid to his fallen comrades, only partially aware that had suffered severe wounds to his lower body. He refused treatment and tended casualties by having other soldiers carry him to the victims.

"When I think I was spared, when I should have been killed or paralyzed — the only explanation I can give is that God's hand was on me," said Beikirch, a Baptist.

Although he recovered from most of his injuries, Beikirch was unable to return to active duty. He left the Army in August 1971, only to find a different struggle that he and many other brand-new veterans were just beginning to discover.

The 'welcome' home

It wasn't until they returned stateside



Greg Francis/Staff photographer

J. Max Lill said he still gets choked up when he visits the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial in Highland Park, Rochester.

that many soldiers realized the deep rift in public sentiment about the U.S. involvement in Vietnam. And if protestors couldn't confront government officials, they instead targeted soldiers with their hostility.

"People were spitting on you. I had 30 construction guys going, 'F— you.' And you say, 'Why me?'" Lill remarked.

Even veterans' committees refused to embrace the Vietnam vets, Lill said. Beikirch was so discouraged at the public reaction that he spent several months in Canada and in the wilderness of New Hampshire.

In October 1973, Beikirch received word that he had been selected for the Congressional Medal of Honor. He went to Washington and reluctantly received the medal from then-President Richard M. Nixon, but was still not sure himself whether he was a hero or a villain.

"I felt very uncomfortable," Beikirch said.

Two Viets' viewpoints

Dao, the South Vietnamese lieutenant colonel, is a longtime friend of Deacon Joseph Hoc Thai Nguyen, parish deacon at St. Anthony of Padua Church in Rochester. Dao and Deacon Nguyen were longstanding members of the South Vietnamese military after they fled there from North Vietnam in 1954. That was the year of the Geneva Accords, which split South Vietnam from communist North Vietnam along the 17th Parallel.

Nearly 20 years later, as a high-ranking army official, Dao took part in the Paris Peace Accord negotiations that led to the U.S. cease-fire. The talks, conducted over

a four-year period, left Dao and his fellow South Vietnamese frustrated as the United States moved toward total withdrawal.

"If you can't get the support of your people, the United States, the free world — how can you win?" Dao said.

Dao, Deacon Nguyen and their families eventually fled the country when the Viet Cong captured the South Vietnamese capital of Saigon in April 1975, effectively ending the Vietnam War. Had Dao and Deacon Nguyen remained, they would have faced imprisonment.

"We love freedom," explained Nguyen, 56, who served as an officer in the South Vietnamese Navy.

But Dao and Deacon Nguyen left several family members and friends behind — people they may never see again. Even though Vietnam and the U.S. are working toward normalizing their relations, Dao and Deacon Nguyen said they still consider a return to their country risky because of their military background.

"I can never go back," Deacon Nguyen said.

Dao, who works at Lederle-Praxis Biologicals in Henrietta, said he has received "a lot of help from the American government and people." But as much as he appreciates America, he and Deacon Nguyen said they still dream of the day when their homeland will again become a free nation.

The struggle to heal

None of the people interviewed had praise for the U.S. government's role in how the war was handled. That frustration was touched off anew when Robert McNamara, former Secretary of Defense, in 1995 admitted that he'd continued ordering escalation of troops into a war that he had already concluded could not be won.

"I said to myself, 'McNamara, you S.O.B., you sent those people out to be killed or maimed,'" Culhane said.

"He was deploying people he knew were going to die, in a cause he didn't believe in. That's very troubling — very troubling," Feasel said.

However, Feasel tried to chalk up Vietnam as a crucial learning experience.

"One of the positives is that we'll never fight a war like that again," he said.

Beikirch, despite all his struggles, said he's proud of his military duty.

"I still think it's a tremendous, tremendous service to defend your country," Beikirch said.

Feasel, also, is glad to have served in the war, saying he "wouldn't give up the experience for anything."

However, he added quietly, "I lost people I was close to. That was the downside."

Feasel, noting that emotional wounds of this magnitude do not go away easily, said that our nation's healing over Vietnam has only begun in recent years.

"To be objective on something, you really need a generation to think about it," commented Feasel, who is now director of the Criminal Justice and Public Safety Program at Monroe Community College.

For a number of years, Culhane said, many people simply refused to acknowledge the war.

"It just infuriated me," said Culhane, who now serves as assistant to the president at Rochester Institute of Technology.

But Culhane refused to let people forget. He led a 10-year effort to construct the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, located in Rochester's Highland Park. The elaborate \$1.2-million memorial, dedicated in September 1996, salutes the 280 people from Monroe County and five surrounding counties who were killed in Vietnam.

Culhane, who served as director of the memorial committee, said the memorial's main purpose is "to commemorate, to educate, to heal."

Lill, a vice-chairman of the committee, said his involvement in the project has helped him with his personal healing.

"A lot of the stuff I had buried," said Lill, who is currently president of Industrial Incineration, Inc., in Rochester.

For Beikirch, it took several years before he underwent a major healing experience. That occurred in the early 1980s, when a park in the town of Greece was named in his honor.

"The petition (to name it after me) stopped at 10,000. It just hit me that all these people were saying that I'm not so bad — I'm OK," said Beikirch, now a guidance counselor at Greece Arcadia Middle School. "I was astonished. That was a critical, critical part of my becoming better."

Beikirch, a former Baptist minister, said his faith has also helped him move on.

"I know God had forgiven me for everything I'd done," Beikirch said.

Lill said that God's will, also, has helped him look to the future with hope.

"There is a reason God brought me back home," Lill said. "Maybe now it's time to put (Vietnam) away, put it in its place."



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