

One Veterans Day not enough, some Vietnam soldiers say

By Gary Peterson

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Jerry Yahiro believes he knows why, more than 38 years after the last U.S. troops returned from Southeast Asia, America is still trying to give Vietnam veterans a proper welcome home.

"A lot of it is because of the national guilt I think our country still suffers today," said Yahiro, a Danville resident and Army veteran who saw combat in the Vietnam War.

Veterans Day is an observance intended for all U.S. veterans from all wars. But there is a movement, more than a decade old and still gaining momentum, to give Vietnam veterans something more -- namely the homecoming they were denied decades ago.

Welcome Home Vietnam Veterans Day was first proposed by 63-year-old Army veteran Jose Ramos, of Whittier. It calls for an observance each March 30, the anniversary of the day in 1973 when the final American troops withdrew from Vietnam. To date, 24 states have either enacted legislation for an ongoing observance or passed a one-time resolution, with half coming on board in 2011. (Some states cite March 29.)

Barbara Boxer is one of four Senators and Representatives who signed a letter to President Barack Obama in May urging him to make Welcome Home Vietnam Veterans Day an annual federal observation.

"Establishing a national day of recognition for veterans of the Vietnam War will honor their service and show the deep gratitude our nation feels for these brave men and women," Boxer said in a release announcing the letter.

"That, to me, would be disrespectful to World War I veterans and World War II veterans that have gone before us," said Walnut Creek's John Reese, a Navy vet who served three tours in Vietnam. "And Korean vets. I also think it would be somewhat disrespectful putting us on a pedestal, which we are somehow above those serving today."

No one disputes that many Vietnam veterans got a chilly reception when they returned from serving in a divisive, unpopular conflict. Not all of them have horror stories to tell, but it seems they all know someone who does.

"I had friends who had some very bad experiences," said Yahiro, a native of Hawaii. "Some were based on ethnicity. Being Asian, many of my friends were singled out as, 'This is what the enemy looks like.' Other friends were spat upon."

"There are some bitter stories in our group," said Reese, a member of the Vietnam Veterans of Diablo Valley.

For some, no reaction was a good reaction.

"I don't recall being treated badly, anywhere, anytime," said Tim Haslem, a Walnut Creek resident who was an infantryman in Vietnam. "There certainly weren't any welcome home parades or ceremonies."

The make-good effort began barely five years after the war's end, when President Jimmy Carter signed legislation dedicating a spot on the Washington mall for a memorial to those who had served in Vietnam. The wall opened in 1982. Replica walls, scaled-down versions of the original, began touring the country in 1984 -- one is on display at Cupertino's Memorial Park through Saturday. In October 2000, 25 state governors signed proclamations officially welcoming home Vietnam veterans. It was called "The Final Mission."

Ramos wanted more. "I came back with a lot of survivor's guilt," said Ramos, a medic who served a year in combat. "I belonged to a PTSD group. I went to (weekly meetings) without fail for 12 years. Of the guys in those groups, six passed. As these guys went down, I thought, isn't this rude? Shouldn't America say, 'Thank you for your service'?"

Ramos began his grass-roots movement in 2000. His first goal, a proclamation from Whittier, was achieved in 2002. "I wanted to show there was at least one city in country that cares," he said.

From there he got Rep. Linda Sanchez to introduce the idea to Congress. He rode his motorcycle to Washington, D.C., and knocked on politicians' doors. In 2009, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger signed Welcome Home Vietnam Veterans Day into California law.

"I wanted it because we deserved it," Ramos said. "What I didn't know was that America really felt bad."

Haslem likes the idea of a special day for Vietnam veterans.

"I was talking to another veteran," he said, "and he said something that rang true for me: 'In the last 40 years, I spent 35 years trying to forget about all that, and the last five trying to remember.' Maybe it is time to remember it in another context."

There is anecdotal evidence to suggest that the process has been ongoing for years. As a member of the Vietnam Veterans of Diablo Valley, Reese has received rousing ovations at public appearances. It was in Danville's Fourth of July parade, about 15 years ago, that he received his first heartfelt welcome home.

"A woman stepped out of the crowd and hugged me and said, 'Welcome home,' " he said." I broke down. I didn't know how to handle it."

Reese now handles it by paying it forward, assisting the group in flag-waving welcome-homes for soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.

"We'd rather look at what we're doing as a group to serve fellow veterans," he said.

"What happened in the past cannot be corrected by establishing a separate date to honor Vietnam veterans," Yahiro said. "I feel that what we need to put the emphasis on is never, ever letting that happen again."

ALL WARS MEMORIAL

What: The All Wars Memorial – Memorial Day Remembrance - Annually

Where: Oak Hill Park on Sycamore Valley Road next to Monta Vista High School

When: Sunday through Saturday (7 days a week) Sunrise to Sunset in the Park

More information: www.allwarsmemorial.org - AWM Pavers still available