

Welcome Home the Unsung Soldiers of Vietnam

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Those of us who were there know personally that the Vietnam War was an unpopular one. The negative reactions to it had spread to almost every nook and cranny of the country. Although the dissention was directed at the current administration, it was deflected to the serving soldiers, many of whom to this day still carry its emotional baggage.

Our battalion was trucked to an isolated section of the west Texas desert outside of Fort Bliss in September 1965--away from all the anti-war protesters. There were no crowds or loved ones to send us off. The band played but there were no cheers or tears for only present were the military band, our four army batteries, and the tumbleweeds. The band played on as we boarded a twilight train to catch a troop ship destined for Vietnam that was waiting in the Oakland harbor. We rode the Southern Pacific rails through New Mexico where a sign greeted us at Lordsburg saying, "This is the Western Continental Divide." Our outward bound journey continued through the rural Arizona cactus landscape and up through the sleepy town of Needles, California. As we traveled the countryside, we were given strict orders to keep our black window shades pulled so the protesting world not know who we were--proud soldiers carrying out our sworn duty to serve honorably for our country. As the train chugged into San Francisco there were anti-war protesters standing at every crossing. It was hard to understand: How could this dissention be directed against us?

We proceeded to the Oakland Army Terminal where we pulled onto a pier siding that ran right onto the dock. We had become part of history, one of the many troop trains that converged on the Oakland Army Terminal pier during the escalation of the Vietnam War.

We embarked for Vietnam on the USNS Gaffey and went topside. Again only an Army band gave us a send-off; we looked out at an otherwise empty wharf. As we

passed Alcatraz Island and steamed under the Golden Gate Bridge, we were all caught up in the present and, not knowing what the future held for us, we joined in singing "God Bless America." (*Tears welled up in my eyes for this was not only an emotional occurrence but an emotional recurrence: My father on his deployment to Italy during WWII, embarking from New York, Stratton Island Pier 18 on the troop ship Santa Paula wrote; "The skyline of New York City was hazy but it became clear what we were fighting for when the "Statue of Liberty" came into view."*)

For those of us who were blessed to return, the homecoming was just as inconspicuous and barely discernible as our deployment. Our homebound "freedom bird" landed at a secluded section of Travis Air Force Base, CA. Once again, there were no cheers or tears, for only present at this joyous awaited moment were...us--just some forgotten soldiers returning home from the Vietnam War. (Through no wish of my own the feelings I have now for that homecoming is neither jubilant nor honored, and the insults and ungratefulness in the days that followed have been scratched into a dark place of my memory. I was not prepared to be dishonored.)

Time goes by and times have certainly changed but one thing is definite. Time will not erase those deep-rooted memories because of the fear they implanted, those mixed feelings because of the betrayal they conveyed, and those pent-up emotions demanding to be released. Therefore, we, the unsung soldiers of Vietnam, will not forget to remember, honor, and salute those who have their names etched in black granite. And when I meet my brothers who served, healing comes as a hostage just released--for I will welcome them home!

"I was prepared to serve, I was prepared to be wounded, I was prepared to die, and however, when I came home, I was not prepared to be forgotten."
Author Unknown.