

40th Anniversary Of Vietnam War Withdrawal: Memories Still Strong

(Huffington Post)

By JAY REEVES and DAVID DISHNEAU 03/29/13 11:23 AM ET EDT 
(Excerpts)

The last U.S. combat troops left Vietnam 40 years ago Friday, and the date holds great meaning for many who fought the war, protested it or otherwise lived it. While the fall of Saigon two years later is remembered as the final day of the Vietnam War, many had already seen their involvement in the war finished – and their lives altered – by March 29, 1973.

U.S. soldiers leaving the country feared angry protesters at home. North Vietnamese soldiers took heart from their foes' departure, and South Vietnamese who had helped the Americans feared for the future.

Many veterans are encouraged by changes they see. The U.S. has a volunteer military these days, not a draft, and the troops coming home aren't derided for their service. People know what PTSD stands for, and they're insisting that the government takes care of soldiers suffering from it and other injuries from Iraq and Afghanistan.

Below are the stories of a few of the people who experienced a part of the Vietnam War firsthand.

'PATRIOTISM NEEDS TO BE CELEBRATED'

Jan Scruggs served in Vietnam in 1969 and 1970, and he conceived the national Vietnam Veterans Memorial as a tribute to the warriors, not the war.

Today, he wants to help ensure that veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan aren't forgotten, either.

His Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund is raising funds for the Education Center at the Wall. It would display mementos left at the black granite wall and photographs of the 58,282 whose names are engraved there, as well as photos of fallen fighters from Iraq and Afghanistan.

"All their patriotism needs to be celebrated. Just like with Vietnam, we have to separate the war from the warrior," Scruggs said in a telephone interview.

An Army veteran, Scruggs said visitors to the center will be asked to perform some community service when they return home to reinforce the importance of self-sacrifice.

"The whole thing about service to the country was something that was very much turned on its head during the Vietnam War," Scruggs said.

He said some returning soldiers were told to change into civilian clothes before stepping into public view to avoid the scorn of those who opposed the war.

"What people seemed to forget was that none of us who fought in Vietnam had anything to do with starting that war," Scruggs said. "Our purpose was merely to do what our country asked of us. And I think we did it pretty well."

'MORE INTERESTED IN GETTING BACK'

Dave Simmons of West Virginia was a corporal in the U.S. Army who came back from Vietnam in the summer of 1970. He said he didn't have specific memories about the final days of the war because it was something he was trying to put behind him.

"We were more interested in getting back, getting settled into the community, getting married and getting jobs," Simmons said.

He said he was proud to serve and would again if asked. But rather than proudly proclaim his service when he returned from Vietnam, the Army ordered him to get into civilian clothes as soon as he arrived in the U.S. The idea was to avoid confrontations with protestors.

"When we landed, they told us to get some civilian clothes, which you had to realize we didn't have, so we had to go in airport gift shops and buy what we could find," Simmons said.

Simmons noted that when the troops return today, they are often greeted with great fanfare in their local communities, and he's glad to see it.

"I think that's what the general public has learned – not to treat our troops the way they treated us," Simmons said.

5 Simmons is now helping organize a Vietnam Veterans Recognition Day in Charleston that will take place Saturday.

"Never again will one generation of veterans abandon another. We stick with that," said Simmons, president of the state council of the Vietnam Veterans of America. "We go to the airport. ... We're there when they leave. We're there when they come home. We support their
10 families when they're gone. I'm not saying that did not happen to the Vietnam vet, but it wasn't as much. There was really no support for us."

A RISING PANIC

15 Tony Lam was 36 on the day the last U.S. combat troops left Vietnam. He was a young husband and father, but most importantly, he was a businessman and U.S. contractor furnishing dehydrated rice to South Vietnamese troops. He also ran a fish meal plant and a refrigerated shipping business that exported shrimp.

As Lam, now 76, watched American forces dwindle and then disappear, he felt a rising panic. His close association with the Americans was well-known and he needed to get out – and get
20 his family out – or risk being tagged as a spy and thrown into a Communist prison. He watched as South Vietnamese commanders fled, leaving whole battalions without a leader. "We had no chance of surviving under the Communist invasion there. We were very much worried about the safety of our family, the safety of other people," he said this week from his adopted home in Westminster, Calif.

25 But Lam wouldn't leave for nearly two more years after the last U.S. combat troops, driven to stay by his love of his country and his belief that Vietnam and its economy would recover. When Lam did leave, on April 21, 1975, it was aboard a packed C-130 that departed just as Saigon was about to fall. He had already worked for 24 hours at the airport to get others out after seeing his wife and two young children off to safety in the Philippines.

30 "My associate told me, 'You'd better go. It's critical. You don't want to end up as a Communist prisoner.' He pushed me on the flight out. I got tears in my eyes once the flight took off and I looked down from the plane for the last time," Lam recalled. "No one talked to each other about how critical it was, but we all knew it."

Now, Lam lives in Southern California's Little Saigon, the largest concentration of Vietnamese
35 outside of Vietnam.

In 1992, Lam made history by becoming the first Vietnamese-American to be elected to public office in the U.S. and he went on to serve on the Westminster City Council for 10 years.

Looking back over four decades, Lam says he doesn't regret being forced out of his country and forging a new, American, life.

40 "I went from being an industrialist to pumping gas at a service station," said Lam, who now works as a consultant and owns a Lee's Sandwich franchise, a well-known Vietnamese chain. "But thank God I am safe and sound and settled here with my six children and 15 grandchildren," he said. "I'm a happy man."

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ANTI-WAR ACTIVISM

50 John Sinclair said he felt "great relief" when he heard about the U.S. troop pull-out. Protesting the war was a passion for the counter-culture figure who inspired the John Lennon song, "John Sinclair." The Michigan native drew a 10-year prison sentence after a small-time pot

bust but was released after 2 1/2 years – a few days after Lennon, Stevie Wonder and others performed at a 1971 concert to free him.

"There wasn't any truth about Vietnam – from the very beginning," said Sinclair by phone from New Orleans, where he spends time when he isn't in Detroit or his home base of Amsterdam.

"In those times we considered ourselves revolutionaries," said Sinclair, a co-founder of the White Panther Party who is a poet and performance artist and runs an Amsterdam-based online radio station. "We wanted equal distribution of wealth. We didn't want 1 percent of the rich running everything. Of course, we lost."

The Vietnam War also shaped the life of retired Vermont businessman John Snell, 64, by helping to instill a lifetime commitment to anti-war activism. He is now a regular at a weekly anti-war protest in front of the Montpelier federal building that has been going on since long before the start of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The Haslett, Mich., native graduated from high school in 1966 and later received conscientious objector status. He never had to do the required alternative service because a foot deformity led him to being listed as unfit to serve.

"They were pretty formative times in our lives and we saw incredible damage being done, it was the first war to really show up on television. I remember looking in the newspaper and seeing the names of people I went to school with as being dead and injured every single week," said Snell, who attended Michigan State University before moving to Vermont in 1977.

"Things were crazy. I remember sitting down in the student lounge watching the numbers being drawn on TV, there were probably 200 people sitting in this lounge watching as numbers came up, the guys were quite depressed by the numbers that were being drawn," he said. "There certainly were people who volunteered and went with some patriotic fervor, but by '67 or '68 there were a lot of people who just didn't want to have anything to do with it."

Dishneau reported from Hagerstown, Md., and Reeves reported from Birmingham, Ala. Also contributing to this report were Associated Press writers Chris Brummitt in Hanoi, Jocelyn Gecker in Bangkok, Gillian Flaccus in Tustin, Calif., Lisa Cornwell in Cincinnati, Kevin Freking in Washington, Wilson Ring in Montpelier, Vt., Susanne M. Schafer in Columbia, S.C., and Jeff Karoub in Detroit.

From: 40th Anniversary Of Vietnam War Withdrawal: Memories Still Strong

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/03/29/40th-anniversary-vietnam-war_n_2978032.html