



South Dakota State Archives

South Dakotans in Vietnam - Returning Home

In 1986, the Vietnam Veterans Oral History Project compiled oral history interviews from several Vietnam War veterans. Thirty-three veterans gave interviews on various topics relating to Vietnam including basic training, the trip to Vietnam, being in the field, helicopter and aircraft stories, support groups, the Vietnamese, and their general thoughts on the war and the country. The following excerpts are from South Dakota Vietnam veterans describing their return to the United States. While reading the interviews, make note of the different encounters soldiers had upon returning to the United States. How were they treated in South Dakota as compared to the rest of the U.S.?

Excerpts from Interviews with South Dakota Vietnam Veterans

Terry Tople, Machinegunner, 9th Infantry Division --

I came out on a stretcher at Travis Air Force Base in California, and I got stuff thrown at me, rotten eggs, tomatoes. All of us coming off that airplane were wounded, and they were throwing stuff at us. I've told that to people around here and they just can't believe it. It happened. They were yelling at us. I can refer back to when the World War II people came home and they were heroes. When we came home we were the enemy. That really hurt.

Pat Murphy, Navy Sea Bees --

When I came back from Vietnam I landed on the East Coast once and once on the West Coast, and people on either coast, bigger cities, were very, very anti-Vietnam. They protested at the airports and military airports. We left Quonset Point, Rhode Island, which was a military airbase, and they were out there protesting, and I thought that was just ridiculous. When we came back from Vietnam and landed out there -- you are just so happy to be home, and you have these long haired pukes out there waving signs about baby killers. I was almost to the point where I was bummed out, and then came back on leave. I rode home on a bus. I got home about 5:00 and Dad picked me up in Pierre, and we went on down to Winner and stopped down at the bar when we got there. It was like I won the Medal of Honor or something. People really treated me good. It made you feel good then, you know, it really did. I think the whole Midwest is kind of that way. They are the first guys to join up. It is the redneck, I suppose.

Dale Bertsch, Infantry-Truck Driver, 9th Infantry Division --

I landed in Oakland and processed out. We got out of San Francisco, flew to Chicago and then to Minneapolis. I called my Mom from Minneapolis and I said, "What's for dinner?" I was in Minneapolis standing in line, and this older gentleman insisted that I go ahead of him. It was truly a once in a lifetime thing, you know, when a soldier comes home. There's no other feeling like it...But when it came time to socialize -- I mean, I came back in February, and it wasn't too hard to figure out where the guy with the short hair and the golden suntan had just come from. I guess what sticks in my mind the most to this day -- very shortly after I came home, I saw this poster of an attractive girl dressed in semi-hippie garb, and the poster said, "Girls say yes to men who say no" -- no to the military. When you're 22 years old, you know, a guy's got a bit of a libido there. You almost wish you could go back to Vietnam, because these guys don't know what the hell is going on.

Tom Magedanz, Rifleman, 1st Marine Division --

Being home and being in a place where nothing is gonna happen to you, where it's not dangerous anymore, and you can lie in a bed, that was nice. I remember one thing I did one time -- in Vietnam you had to be careful, you didn't just light a cigarette at night, because the snipers could see you. I went out one night in my folks' front lawn and lit my cigarette lighter and held it up above me head, you know, because, "I can do this now. There's nobody out there anymore." It was just a relief to be able to sleep and to not be afraid. Dealing with people was kind of a disappointment because nobody really knew much about Vietnam. A guy I used to play baseball with said he hadn't seen me in a long time and, "Weren't you in the service or something for a while?" It was like I'd never been away. Nobody asked very much about it; they'd ask you if it rained a lot in the monsoon, if your M-16 jammed and if you ever had any dope, and that would be the end of the conversation. I did have one incident later on at college. A guy in my fraternity was kinda drunk. I wasn't telling them a bunch of war stories, but somebody asked and I had said something about Vietnam. He was really against the war, and he exploded. He held an imaginary rifle with a bayonet and shoved it at my neck. He said, "How would you like it if someone did that to you, to kill if you're actually face to face with killing, so you can really understand it." He was going to raise my consciousness. He had never talked to me about what I did in Vietnam. He didn't know what I did or what I thought, but he just totally hated me. That's the only time anybody really did anything against me because I had been in Vietnam.

Nilo Reber, Artilleryman, Americal Division --

Families were glad to see a guy, but the general public seemed like, “Hi, where ya been?” Just like you’d been gone a week or so. They didn’t seem to pay much attention. A few of them recognized that I had been someplace. At the time it didn’t bother me, but looking back, I had some things bother me that I didn’t quite -- there was something different when I came home. In the year between, things had changed, or maybe I had changed more than anything, but I never realized until later years that it bothered me more than I thought probably. It seemed like I missed out on some things. I probably looked at things differently than before I left. I probably grew up or something.

Rod Anderson, Surveillance Pilot, Army --

I remember landing in the airport and going in the men’s room and getting out of my uniform and putting on civilian clothes. I decided I didn’t want to be encountering anybody and getting a hard time for being one of the “baby killers” coming home; so I kind of sneaked home that first time.

Tom Roubideaux, Army Special Forces --

Every time I came home, I was honored. I’d make it through the hippies and everybody else, get to South Dakota and it was just like you’re coming into a veil. You’re inside of it and it’s calm. It seemed like I always came into Pierre because the flights were from Minneapolis to Pierre. You’d get down there by Murdo, White River, and “Oh, I’m home! Forty-five more minutes,” you know. It was like you went into the inner security of the reservation boundaries, and, “I’m home.”

Questions

Describe some events that happened to soldiers upon arrival in the United States.

Describe some events that happened to soldiers in South Dakota.

Do you think Tom Magedanz's incident at college was isolated or typical? Why?

What was Nilo Reber's difficulty with the "general public"?

Would you describe a Vietnam veteran's return home as being positive or negative? Why?