

Uncommon Heroes. Common Virtues.

The County of San Diego Office of Military
& Veteran Affairs honors veterans on the
50th anniversary of the Vietnam War



COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO OFFICE OF MILITARY & VETERAN AFFAIRS



The photos on this page were collected from San Diego veterans who served during the Vietnam War.
COURTESY



'We Were There'

The County of San Diego Office of Military & Veteran Affairs commemorates the men and women who fought in the Vietnam War

BY MATT JOCKS

Anationwide effort to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Vietnam War is underway. If 1968, a midpoint of the war, seems like an unusual milestone for the commemoration, it also seems fitting for the most complicated war the country has fought.

It was a war that the U.S. entered gradually, over more than a decade. And, despite achieving conventional military victory in most of its battles, it was a war in which the U.S. failed to achieve its objective.

The roots of the war began in the 1940s. Vietnam had been part of the French empire but, following the war, forces led by Ho Chi Minh took control of the north.

America provided aid to the French in their unsuccessful attempt to reclaim the north. When France withdrew and North Vietnam moved on the south, the U.S. presence grew. The first U.S. battle casualties took place in 1959.

As the war widened, it grew into a Cold War proxy war between the U.S. and Soviet Union, which backed the Viet Cong. The "Domino Theory" laid out by President Eisenhower in 1956 held that the loss of Vietnam to communist rule would lead to other countries following suit. That theory guided the expansion under following presidents.

The alleged attack on a U.S. ship in the Gulf of Tonkin led to widespread bombing by the U.S. By 1969, more than 500,000 American troops were in Vietnam. Many would die there in service to their country.



WILFRED QUINTONG

Back home, Vietnam divided the country with a growing anti-war movement and protests.

In San Diego County, those divisions were felt sharper than most. An area with three major military installations, but also an area with a heavy college presence, support

for the troops and anti-war sentiments were expressed. Sometimes in the same family.

As the U.S. scaled back its presence and ultimately withdrew, veterans returned to grateful families and friends, but a sometimes hostile reception from strangers.

These experiences, both in country and at home, are personal for the men and women who lived them.

Organizations like the County of San Diego Office of Military & Veteran Affairs have stepped in to deal with issues particular to Vietnam veterans, such as the effects of chemicals used during the war and mental health challenges.

"As we commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Vietnam War it is time to fully recognize the sacrifices and commitments that Vietnam veterans have made to our Nation," said Wilfred Quintong, Director of the Office of Military & Veterans Affairs. "It's our duty to finally welcome them home."

Keep reading to learn the stories of local men and women who served in Vietnam.

Vietnam Timeline

- 1950** U.S. provides military assistance to France
- 1958** First U.S. soldier killed in Vietnam
- 1961** U.S. sends 400 Green Berets to Vietnam
- 1962** First use of defoliant Agent Orange
- 1964** Airstrikes ordered after U.S. warship allegedly attacked in Gulf of Tonkin; Congress authorizes use of force
- 1968** Tet offensive marks turning point in U.S. involvement
- 1969** U.S. troop strength peaks at 549,000
- 1973** U.S. ends the draft; peace accords are signed
- 1975** Saigon falls to the North Vietnamese

U.S. in Vietnam by the numbers

2.59 million:

U.S. troops who served in country during the Vietnam War

58,318: U.S. troop deaths

303,635: U.S. troops wounded

2,646: Missing in action

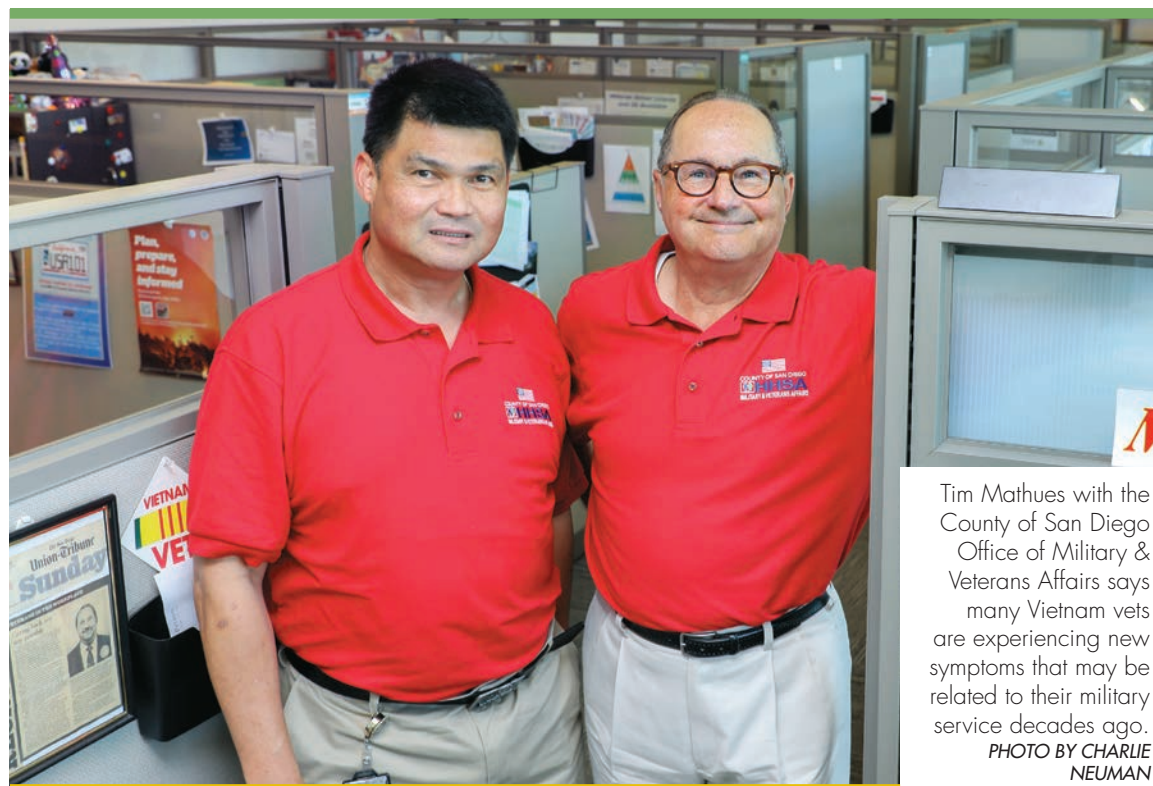
766: U.S. prisoners of war (114 died in captivity)

ON THE COVER: "Da Nang, Vietnam . . . A young Marine waits on the beach during the Marine landing." by an unknown photographer, August 3, 1965, National Archives, Records of the United States Marine Corps

There When **You** Need **It**

As Vietnam veterans age, more of them are seeking assistance from the County of San Diego Office of Military & Veteran Affairs

BY MATT JOCKS



Tim Mathues with the County of San Diego Office of Military & Veteran Affairs says many Vietnam vets are experiencing new symptoms that may be related to their military service decades ago.
PHOTO BY CHARLIE NEUMAN

Tim Mathues has seen the same story play out many times with veterans who come into his office. But even if he hadn't, he would still know that story well.

Because it is his own.

Like so many of his brothers in arms, Mathues completed his service — two years in the Marine Corps during Vietnam — and moved on. Upon his discharge, he said the military's message was, "Here's your DD214. Goodbye and good luck."

Mathues never sought the benefits that were available to veterans.

"My thought was always, I'm OK. Let services go to the guys who really need them, the young vets coming back from Iraq and Afghanistan," he said.

As Veteran Outreach Program Coordinator for the County of San Diego Office of Military & Veteran Affairs, Mathues has made it his mission to convince veterans not to think the way he did. Connecting veterans with the benefits they have earned is now his duty.

The largest group of veterans are the ones from Vietnam. They range in age from early 60s into their 80s. While their service may be decades behind them, some of the effects of their time in Vietnam are just now showing up.

Conditions including general pain, hearing loss, diabetes and cancer may all be simply the result of aging. But they may also be related to their military service.

"When I go out and speak at veterans organizations and I talk to Vietnam vets, I hear the same things: 'When I got out, no one said anything to me, so I never enrolled.

"MY MESSAGE IS THIS: **YOU SERVED. YOU EARNED THESE BENEFITS.**"

Tim Mathues

Veteran Outreach Program Coordinator, County of San Diego Office of Military & Veteran Affairs

Now I've got this (condition) or that," Mathues said. "I tell them those things could be attributed to their service. I tell them we can not only get them treated, but we can get them compensated for it."

Agent Orange, the chemical used to clear foliage on the battlefield, is an issue specific to Vietnam veterans. Exposure to it has been linked to multiple forms of cancer, diabetes and Parkinson's disease.

The Office of Military & Veteran Affairs' mission is to make veterans aware and connect them to the benefits they have earned. They help develop and submit applications and follow through on what can be a lengthy process.

As Vietnam veterans age and enter a period of increased medical concerns and fixed incomes, accessing benefits becomes even more important.

Said Mathues: "My message is this: You served. You earned these benefits."

San Diego County Vietnam Veterans

150,000

Vietnam veterans live in San Diego County (estimate)

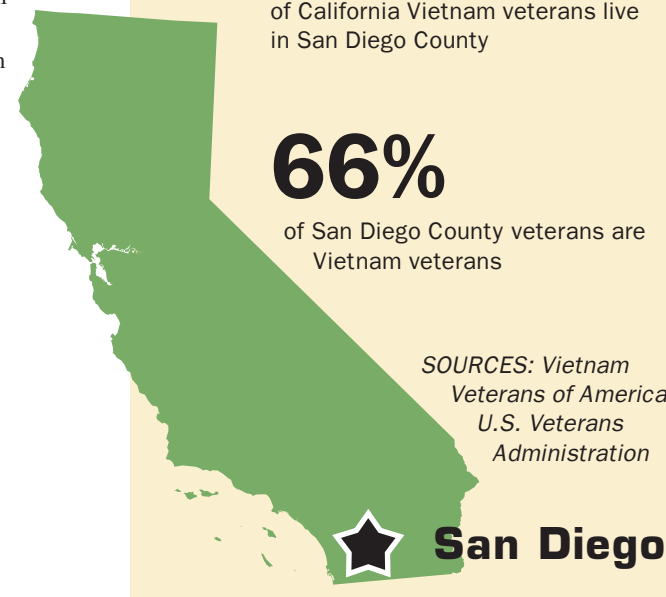
25%

of California Vietnam veterans live in San Diego County

66%

of San Diego County veterans are Vietnam veterans

SOURCES: Vietnam Veterans of America, U.S. Veterans Administration

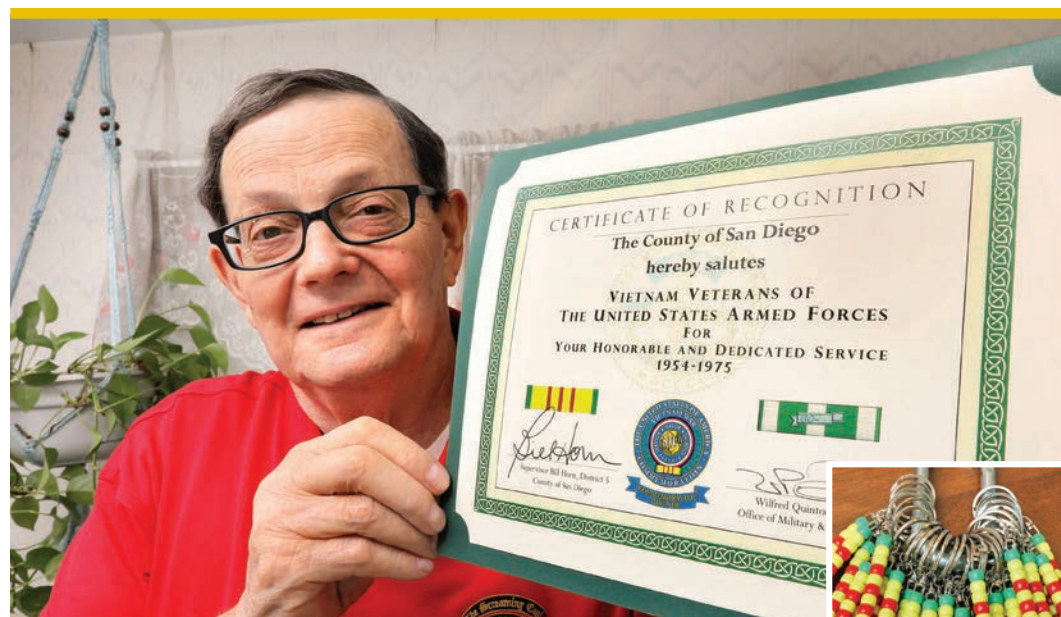


San Diego

An Overdue 'Thank You'

Vietnam veterans in San Diego receive the recognition they never got when they first came home

BY MATT JOCKS



George Nash holds a certificate he was given by the County of San Diego Office of Military & Veterans Affairs to commemorate his service in Vietnam. Nash also honors his fellow veterans with handmade keychains (at right).
PHOTO BY CHARLIE NEUMAN

It didn't take long for George Nash to realize that Vietnam veterans would have a different experience than the veterans who came before them.

Fresh off the plane from Vietnam, going through the process of being mustered out, Nash listened to the words of the officer standing at the front of the room.

"He said he wanted to thank us on behalf of himself and the U.S. government," Nash recalled. "He talked about our service. Then he told us, 'You'll probably want to get out of that uniform as soon as you leave the base. Don't even try hitchhiking in that.'"

Vietnam veterans in the '60s and '70s were largely met with indifference, or worse. It was a far cry from the way veterans of World Wars or Korea were welcomed.

Today, veterans of the Vietnam War in San Diego are being given the recognition they may not have received when they first came home — a special certificate designed by the County of San Diego Office of Military & Veteran Affairs.

Tim Mathues, Veterans Outreach Program Coordinator, was inspired to create the certificate from a similar recognition offered in Georgia. Mathues presents it wherever he can, in the office, at community events and at veterans centers. Even though it's just a piece of paper, the honor is felt deeply.

"You've never seen so many vets with tears in their eyes," Mathues said. "They say, 'No one ever gave us anything.'"

In that same spirit, the Department of Defense created a special pin for veterans in honor of the 50th anniversary of the middle-point of the war.

Nash, a resident of Escondido, was one of those vets. He had no idea that the certificate or the pin existed. He was overwhelmed when Mathues presented the certificate and pin.

Nash, however, has brought that same feeling to others, creating keychains for Vietnam veterans that incorporate replicas of the various service ribbons. Since beginning in 2008, he has presented tens of thousands of the chains.

"I've had everything from men breaking down, sobbing and holding on to me so tightly, to a couple of them who answered with a profanity and told me to get away from them," Nash said. "You know, maybe I would feel the same.

I don't know the things he was dealing with."

The negative reaction many Vietnam veterans received caused many, including Nash, to lie low. He avoided veterans gatherings for many years, engaged in what he called a self-imposed silence.

"I used to work at a hospice care center for veterans," he said. "I remember a Korean veteran asking me 'How does it feel to be part of

the first generation that lost a war?'

"I thought, 'Wait a minute. I never raised any white flag. I worked on those helicopters. I did the job to the best of my ability. Just like any other soldier.'"

After years of dealing with those feelings, and the physical effects of war, a certificate and a pin have a much larger impact than the small space they occupy on a wall or a lapel.

"I'll tell you, that was a very special day for me," Nash said. "It's a very meaningful thing and it occupies a place of honor."

'IT'S A VERY MEANINGFUL THING AND IT OCCUPIES A PLACE OF HONOR.'

George Nash

Vietnam veteran who received a certificate in honor of his service from the County of San Diego Office of Military & Veteran Affairs

Commemorative pin honors Vietnam vets

As part of its efforts to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Vietnam War and honor those who served during that time, the Department of Defense has issued a bronze lapel pin that features the inscription "A grateful nation thanks and honors you."

All living veterans who served between Nov. 1, 1955 and May 15, 1975 are eligible, regardless of location of service.

At the San Diego County Office of Military and Veterans Affairs, Veteran Outreach Program Coordinator Tim Mathues said he tries to give every Vietnam-era veteran who comes to the office a pin, certificate and keychain.

Mathues said he has also presented the items to groups such as the Navy Nurses Association of Southern California and the California Veterans Home in Chula Vista.



Veterans can also get information about the pin and commemorative events at vietnamwar50th.com.

Don Barnard, Vietnam Veterans of America chapter president, considers helping vets a duty and an honor.
PHOTO BY CHARLIE NEUMAN



VVA Chapter gives back to local vets

BY RODNEY OROSCO

There is a promise every combat soldier makes their buddy: I will not leave you behind. The Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter #472 embodies that promise.

"The organization was founded with a simple goal," says chapter Vice President Don Barnard. "We will provide support to San Diego's Vietnam veterans."

The San Diego Chapter of the VVA was founded in 1989 and reflects the mission of the national organization: "Support the full range of issues important to Vietnam veterans, to create a new identity for this generation of veterans, and to change public perception of Vietnam veterans."

"WE LOVE TO TELL OUR STORY. IT IS THE ONLY WAY TO KEEP OUR HISTORY ALIVE."

Don Barnard

VVA Chapter #472 Vice President

In practice, this means helping veterans file for disability claims, helping veterans file for VA pensions and helping surviving spouses and family members qualify for veteran's services. Barnard knows how to navigate the VA "ropes" thanks to his day job as a contracted veteran outreach specialist with the County of San Diego Office of Military & Veteran Affairs.

"We meet the needs of the local vets by providing various means of assistance," Barnard said. Help can include money for gas, a ride to a medical appointment and even help paying rent.

The chapter also provides speakers to local schools. "We love to tell our story," he said. "It is the only way to keep our history alive." The chapter also gives out scholarships to college-bound students, Barnard explained.

Chapter #472 has 190 active members serving the region's veterans.

"Veterans are respected and served regardless of when they served," Barnard said. "We will leave no veteran behind."

For more information about Chapter #472, visit www.vva472.us.

Mission Accomplished

Veterans find a home with Veterans Village

In terms a soldier would appreciate, the Veterans Village of San Diego talks the talk and walks the walk.

Founded in 1981 by Vietnam War veterans who felt their homeless brothers and sisters in arms were isolated and lacking services, today the Village is a mainstay for homeless veteran services in San Diego.

Though the Village now has five locations throughout San Diego County and is recognized nationally as a leader in serving homeless veterans (this included a profile in 2010 on the news-magazine show "60 Minutes"), the nonprofit organization has stayed loyal to its original mission.

"Our core mission is serving veterans, period," said Kim Mitchell, Veteran's Village president and CEO.

Mitchell's commitment to serving veterans stems from her personal story. She was born in Vietnam. Orphaned as a baby, Mitchell was found by U.S. military personnel on the side of the road outside of Da Nang. She would become the beloved adopted daughter of a U.S. airman.

Mitchell followed her father's example and joined the service, eventually becoming a U.S. Naval officer.

She is happy to pay her service forward even in retirement.

The Village serves area veterans with a variety of services, including a dental clinic held three times a week.

"I had a vet come running up to me one time," Mitchell said. "He was so proud, 'Look! I got teeth!' he told me through a very big smile."

"OUR CORE MISSION IS SERVING VETERANS, PERIOD."

Kim Mitchell,

Veteran's Village president and CEO.

The Village builds self-esteem and new lives — the Village runs a 500-bed, in-house rehabilitation program to help veterans get clean and sober, Mitchell said.

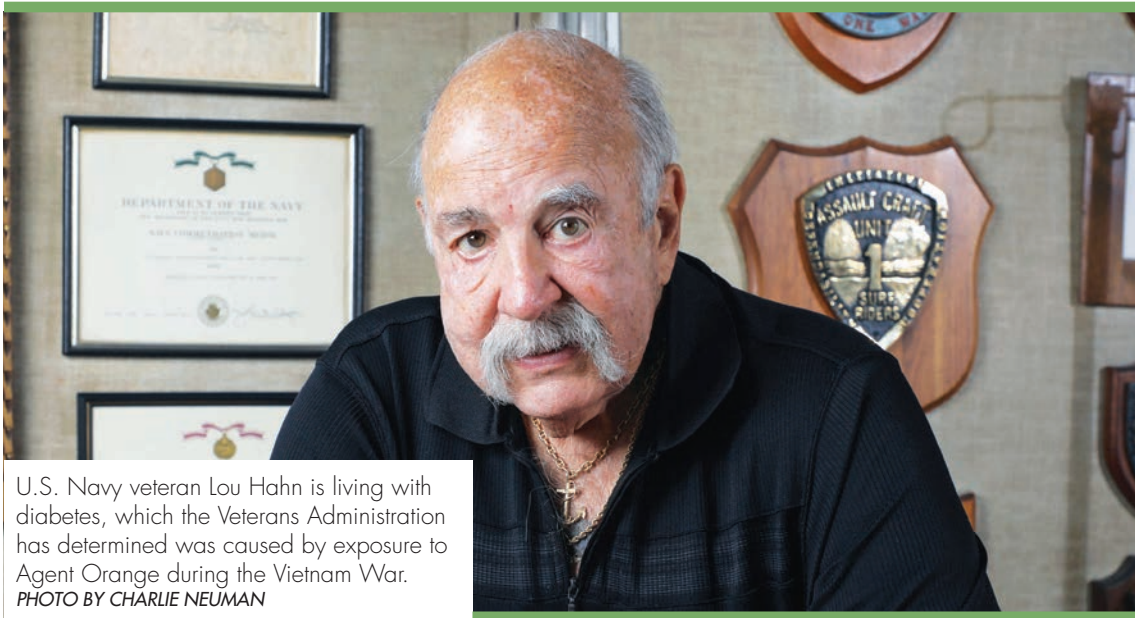
While the Village was created to assist veterans of the Vietnam War, a new generation of veterans are seeking assistance.

"We are seeing a lot of post-9/11 veterans," Mitchell said. "And, it is an interesting dynamic happening — the older veterans are teaching the younger ones."

Mitchell said the old vets are telling the younger ones to slow down, to appreciate the services available and to not be ashamed to seek help.

Creating a mental health clinic for vets and their families, helping vets pay rent, getting vets clothes for a job interview, and getting vets new teeth — Mitchell is a leader of her word.

"I will endure anything to see these men and women get help," she said.



U.S. Navy veteran Lou Hahn is living with diabetes, which the Veterans Administration has determined was caused by exposure to Agent Orange during the Vietnam War.
PHOTO BY CHARLIE NEUMAN

A Deadly Legacy

Exposure to Agent Orange affects soldier decades later

BY RODNEY OROSCO

During his one-year tour in Vietnam, Lou Hahn never saw the lumbering C-130s dumping the orange powder over the Mekong Delta.

“We knew it was there,” he says, “we could see the river bank with no foliage.”

Initially, Hahn’s swift boat patrolled the coast of south Vietnam. However, the Navy soon realized the shallow draft, 50-foot boats were perfect for patrolling inland rivers — rivers with the jungle growing to the waters edge.

In 1968, the petty officer first class had a very strong opinion of Agent Orange: “I remember thinking it was a blessing,” he says, “I hate to say that now, but that stuff could get rid of that foliage along the river bank, and that saved our butt.”

The “stuff” may have kept him alive in 1968, but the Veterans Administration (VA) now says Agent Orange is the reason Hahn needs to receive dialysis three times a week. Hahn has diabetes, one of several conditions that can be caused by the dangerous herbicide.

“I’m sure I spent a lot of time breathing that stuff in,” he says. “But nobody back then knew what that crap could do.”

The VA now knows what Agent Orange can do.

**“I’M SURE I
SPENT A LOT OF
TIME BREATHING
THAT STUFF IN.”**

Lou Hahn
U.S. Navy veteran

There are 14 conditions, including certain cancers and diabetes, that the VA presumes are caused by exposure to Agent Orange. Vietnam veterans with any of these conditions are considered to have a “presumptive exposure” to Agent Orange and are eligible for disability compensation.

Hahn was diagnosed with diabetes in 1991 and is currently experiencing kidney failure. To help clean his blood, a job his kidneys can no longer do, Hahn’s wife hooks him up to a home dialysis machine three times a week.

Despite his current health struggles, Hahn is not bitter.

“I spent 33 years in the Navy and enjoyed my life,” the San Diego resident says. “We were at war, and that stuff was part of the job — we

didn’t think much of it.”

The deadly legacy of Agent Orange is one Hahn is helping other vets overcome. While Hahn came into contact with the “stuff” while on inland (green water) patrols, he wants the VA to recognize that “blue water” sailors, those serving off the coast, were also injured by Agent Orange.

“The point was, we were all there to serve our country,” he says. “The country needs to serve us now.”

Agent Orange presumptive conditions

The Veterans Administration has officially recognized 14 conditions/diseases presumed to be caused by exposure to Agent Orange or other herbicides during military service. Veterans with one of the following conditions and their survivors may be eligible for benefits.

AL Amyloidosis: A rare disease caused when an abnormal protein, amyloid, enters tissues or organs

Chronic B-cell Leukemias: A type of cancer that affects white blood cells

Chloracne (or similar acneform disease): A skin condition similar to acne that occurs soon after exposure to chemicals

Diabetes Mellitus Type 2: A disease characterized by high blood sugar levels resulting from the body’s inability to respond properly to the hormone insulin

Hodgkin’s Disease: A malignant lymphoma (cancer) characterized by progressive anemia and enlargement of the lymph nodes, liver and spleen

Ischemic Heart Disease: A disease characterized by a reduced supply of blood to the heart that leads to chest pain

Multiple Myeloma: A cancer of plasma cells in bone marrow

Non-Hodgkin’s Lymphoma: A group of cancers that affect the lymph glands and other lymphatic tissue

Parkinson’s Disease: A progressive disorder of the nervous system that affects muscle movement

Peripheral Neuropathy, Early-Onset: A nervous system condition that causes numbness, tingling and motor weakness

Porphyria Cutanea Tarda*: A disorder characterized by liver dysfunction and by thinning and blistering of the skin in sun-exposed areas.

Prostate Cancer: Cancer of the prostate; one of the most common cancers among men

Respiratory Cancers (includes lung cancer): Cancers of the lung, larynx, trachea, and bronchus

Soft Tissue Sarcomas (other than osteosarcoma, chondrosarcoma, Kaposi’s sarcoma, or mesothelioma): A group of different types of cancers in body tissues such as muscle, fat, blood and lymph vessels, and connective tissues

**Under VA’s rating regulations, it must be at least 10 percent disabling within one year of exposure to herbicides.*

Fighting the Invisible Enemy

A Vietnam vet comes to terms with his past

BY RODNEY OROSCO

It was a short paddle out, just past the breakers. He had gone through the motions enough, today would be different.

Robert Lewis took his place in the circle of surfers off the coast of San Diego and waited his turn.

The men bobbing in the water were Vietnam veterans participating in the first memorial “Paddle Out.” The goal: find a safe place to express feelings, frustrations and repressed misery — to come to peace with the horror.

“It was that day, out there, Sept. 30, 2007, that my PTSD came under control,” the 70-year-old former Marine and Vietnam veteran said. “It was like a cleansing.”

In 1968, the 21-year-old Lewis hit Da Nang locked and loaded: “I wanted to go to war.”

Whatever notion of Hollywood glory the young artilleryman envisioned disappeared during his 12 months in the crucible of war.

“Man, we saw people with their guts hanging out ... you don’t see that in the movies,” he said.

Incoming rockets blasting him out of his bed; mauled comrades screaming for help; nights of fighting off the enemy to keep them from overrunning his position. Weeks of no showers, “your socks melted to your feet,” and battlefield promotions because everyone else was dead — “It was total hell,” he said.

Lewis left Vietnam in 1969, but he could not escape the terror.

“I was having a real problem with reality,” he said.

The internal horror of the war distorted into anger welling up inside of the struggling veteran.

“I moved back to Oceanside and became a bouncer to deal with that deep-seated anger,” he says. “I got in a lot of fights.

“Once in a while I would have dreams where I would step out my front door and end up in Vietnam,” he recalled.

Help came in 1991 through his work as a registered nurse with the Veterans Administration (VA). Through work, he took a class on grieving and “I just broke out crying,” he said. “I realized I had a monkey on my back — it was Vietnam.”

The class led to a realization he needed help, real help: “I used to self medicate with a bottle of rum,” he said.

Soon, Lewis began getting involved at the San Diego Veteran’s Center, where group therapy and an arts and crafts program would “keep my mind busy and keep it from wandering.”

The first step Lewis took to getting the monkey off his back — admit he had a problem.

“I used to avoid saying I had PTSD,” he said. “Now, I know, there is no shame in admitting I needed help.”

On his surfboard that day in 2007, Lewis let the ghost of Vietnam slip beneath him and away.

“That day was a baptism,” he said.

**“I REALIZED I HAD
A MONKEY ON
MY BACK — IT
WAS VIETNAM.”**

Robert Lewis
Vietnam Vet



U.S. Marine veteran Robert Lewis overcame his greatest fight of the Vietnam War back at home — PTSD.

PHOTO BY CHARLIE NEUMAN

Symptoms of PTSD

1 Reliving the event (also called re-experiencing symptoms)

- You may have nightmares.
- You may feel like you are going through the event again. This is called a flashback.
- You may see, hear, or smell something that causes you to relive the event. This is called a trigger. News reports, seeing an accident, or hearing a car backfire are examples of triggers.

2 Avoiding situations that remind you of the event

- You may avoid crowds, because they feel dangerous.
- You may avoid driving if you were in a car accident or if your military convoy was bombed.
- You may keep very busy or avoid seeking help because it keeps you from having to think or talk about the event.

3 Negative changes in beliefs and feelings

- You may not have positive or loving feelings toward other people and may stay away from relationships.
- You may forget about parts of the traumatic event or not be able to talk about them.
- You may think the world is completely dangerous, and no one can be trusted.

4 Feeling keyed up (also called hyperarousal)

- You may have a hard time sleeping.
- You may have trouble concentrating.
- You may be startled by a loud noise or surprise.
- You might want to have your back to a wall in a restaurant or waiting room.

Trial by Fire

Facing an enemy onslaught, he kept his soldiers focused and calm

BY RODNEY OROSCO

Vietnam veteran and retired Marine Col. Robert Modrzejewski recalled the day with a slight waver in his voice: “I lost complete control.”

When his commander asked him to take charge of the unit, the junior-grade leader jumped at the chance to prove himself.

What ensued was pandemonium and the total infiltration of chaos into Modrzejewski’s area of operation.

“It was crazy,” he recalled. “Rulers were snapping and kids were running around the class whacking each other.”

Being a third-grade student teacher was hell.

Modrzejewski quickly realized being a teacher wasn’t a good fit for him. He would prove himself a better leader of much taller “troops” — he found his calling in the U.S. Marine Corps and went on to be awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for valor in Vietnam.

While finishing his studies at the University of Wisconsin in 1955, the would-be schoolteacher made a very uncharacteristic decision.

“I saw a Marine recruiter on campus and on a lark I went to talk to him,” he said.

Not from a military family, Modrzejewski figured the

Marines would be a fallback career idea.

The rest is history.

On July 15, 1966, Capt.

Modrzejewski lead Company K into battle along the Demilitarized Zone between North and South Vietnam. The objective: Use the 135-man unit to form a defensive blocking position along the jungle infiltration route used by the North Vietnamese Army.

“The mission started out a fiasco,” he said. Two of his choppers crashed into each other and the other two landed almost a mile from the designated landing zone.

The enemy attacked in larger and larger numbers trying to overwhelm the small and desperate Marine unit.

Capt. Modrzejewski called in air strikes so close the napalm singed his own men. He lost two of his three medics, and his dwindling force repelled attacks of more than 1,000 men.

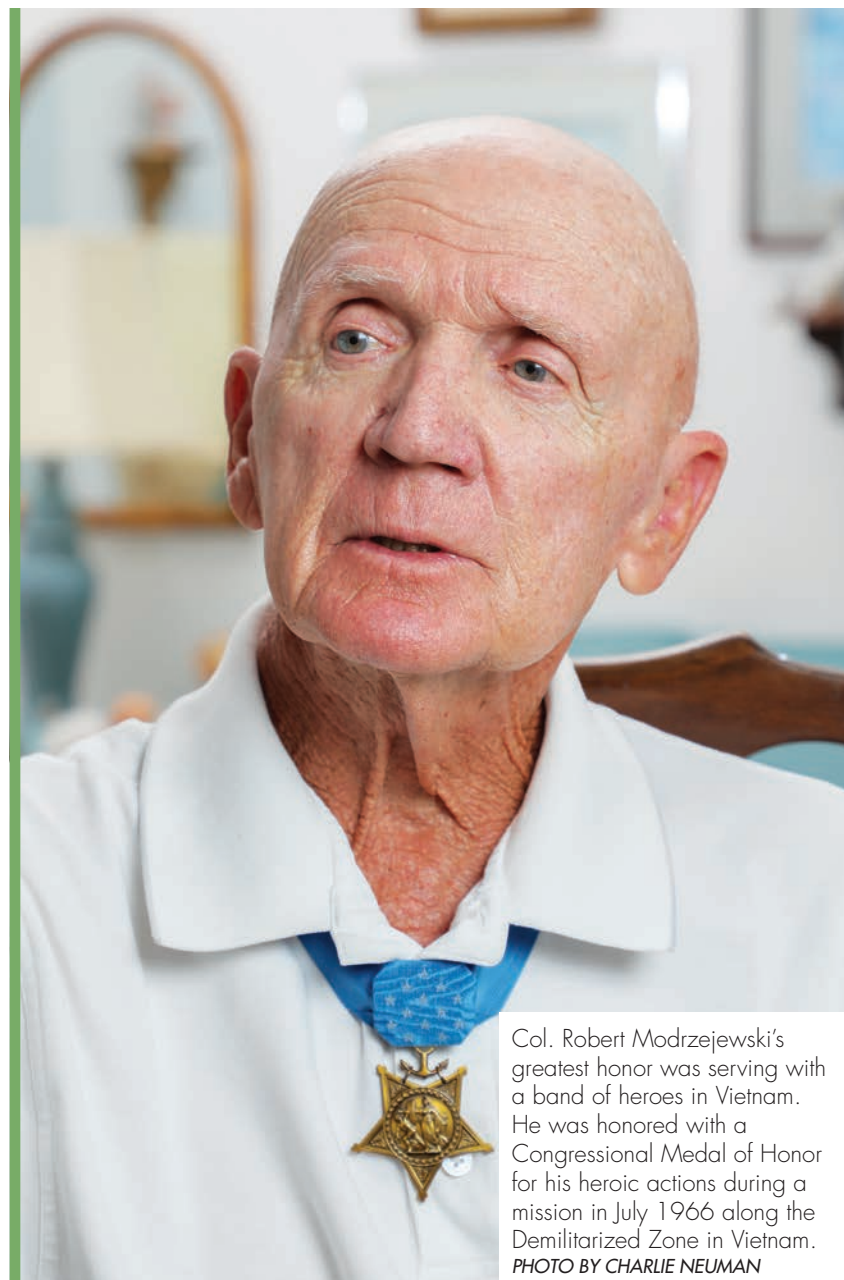
“By the last night — they always attacked at night — we were down to 40 trigger pullers,” he said. “The enemy attacked screaming and yelling with bugles blasting.”

His Medal of Honor citation reads:

“Although his unit was vastly outnumbered and weakened by the previous fighting, [Capt.] Modrzejewski reorganized his men and calmly moved among them to encourage and direct their efforts to heroic limits as they fought to overcome the vicious enemy onslaught.”

Modrzejewski, a San Diego resident, is humble about this honor.

“The troopers — they were the real heroes,” Modrzejewski said. “The medal belongs to them. I’m just the caretaker.”



Col. Robert Modrzejewski’s greatest honor was serving with a band of heroes in Vietnam. He was honored with a Congressional Medal of Honor for his heroic actions during a mission in July 1966 along the Demilitarized Zone in Vietnam.
PHOTO BY CHARLIE NEUMAN



“THE TROOPERS — THEY WERE THE REAL HEROES. THE MEDAL BELONGS TO THEM. I’M JUST THE CARETAKER.”

Col. Robert Modrzejewski
U.S. Marine Corps veteran

Greetings from the War

Navy nurse volunteered to go to Vietnam

BY RODNEY OROSCO

Four months in country and Lt. Cmdr. Casey Meehan had seen plenty.

On Aug. 1, 1968, the Navy nurse began her tour in the intensive care ward of the 650-bed Naval Support Activity Hospital in Da Nang. The U.S. military hospital, one of the largest in Vietnam, treated hundreds of soldiers a month.

By the time the 30-year-old nurse from Minnesota penned her Christmas card to her friend, she had seen hundreds of wounded American soldiers.

"The men coming to my ward would be recovering from all kinds of wounds," she said. "They would be missing arms, legs, parts of legs — all kinds of things."

As "challenging" as her assignment was, Meehan is quick to point out two things: She loved the work and she volunteered to go.

In 1959, Meehan joined the Navy as a way to pay for nursing school at St. Teresa College. "I heard a commercial on the radio for the Navy Nurse Candidate Program," she said. "They would pay for all of my school and give me \$99 a month." It was a deal she could not ignore.

"My parents would soon have to pay for three kids in college. I thought joining the program would be a great idea," she said. "My father was so proud of me and the nuns were so horrified."

The Navy sent the newly minted nurse on tours to the Philippines and Japan. Meehan loved the adventure and the rewarding work.

When her two-and-a-half-year naval recruiting tour in Detroit ended, the Navy had Meehan fill out a "dream card" with her next assignment request.

"There was a war going on," she said.

She requested Vietnam.

"The war was the place I needed to be," she said.

"This is why I became a nurse."

After a "flight that took forever" Meehan arrived in Vietnam. Upon landing, she had a feeling she was not in Minnesota anymore.

"We arrived at 7 a.m. and it was over 100 degrees. The chief nurse was at the bottom of the ramp with her uniform glued to her," Meehan said. "And the smell ... I said a prayer asking for the Lord to help me survive this year."

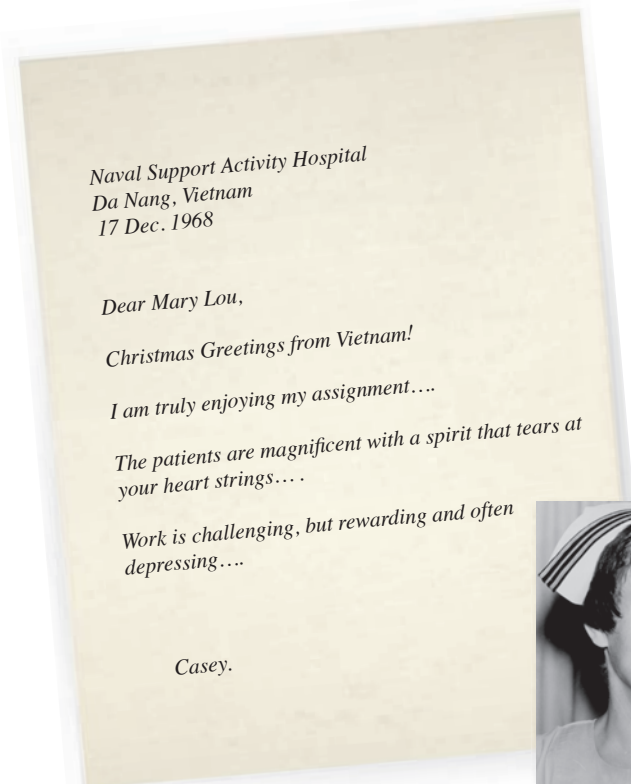
Her year as an intensive care nurse was exciting, exhausting and rewarding.

"Back then, the patients just kept coming," the San Diego resident said. "I saw thousands of patients during my 12-month tour."

She laughs: "I guess we did sort-of heroic things."



For Casey Meehan, serving in the war proved an adventure and a challenge.
PHOTO BY CHARLIE NEUMAN



Being the Change: Women Veterans Forum

More than 300 people attended the inaugural Womens Veterans Forum in San Diego this past October and the effect was exactly what the organizers had hoped it would be.

"It was a tremendous success," said Amanda Etter, the event's co-chairwoman. "The event helped us focus on the unique needs of female veterans."

The forum provided an opportunity for female veterans to learn about resources including veteran's benefits, professional development and educational success.

The event, held at San Diego State University, included guest speakers retired Marine General Angela Salinas, the first female commanding officer of the Marine Corps Recruit Depot in San Diego,

and "MJ" Hegar, an Air Force helicopter pilot shot down in Afghanistan while flying a medivac mission. Salinas is now the CEO of Girls Scouts of Southwest Texas. Hegar is running for Congress in Texas.

"The event let us bring the needs of our female veterans to the local level," Etter said. "This first-of-its-kind event really focused on promoting academic, professional and personal success."

Winning on the Home Front

Vietnam veteran qualifies for property
tax exemption

BY MATT JOCKS

As a member of the U.S. Army 566th Transportation Company in Vietnam, Payton McMullin was crushed between two Jeeps, an accident that probably should have broken his back. Doctors wondered why it didn't.

"I had been picking cotton since I was a kid, all the way until I was 17. Then I worked in construction," McMullin said. "All that work, pulling sacks of cotton, construction — I've got a back like a mule."

Fifty years later and half a world away, McMullin found out that his injury qualified him for a little-known benefit for veterans: a break on property taxes.

Veterans may actually be eligible for two exemptions. One is for those with 100 percent disability. Another is for those who meet the threshold for low income, which in San Diego County is \$60,000 annually for a household.

McMullin qualified for both, reducing his annual property tax for his Spring Valley home by about \$2,000. That's good for about \$160 a month to cover other expenses.

For a 77-year-old veteran living on a fixed income, the value of that extra money is felt every day.

"It makes a big difference," he said. "It means being able to buy some decent food that I need to eat. To be able to go out and get fresh fruits and vegetables and eat better."

"It's also a big help being able to put gas in my car. I go up to the VA in La Jolla once a week, so that's important."

Payton McMullin is saving around \$2,000 a year in property taxes thanks to county tax exemption programs for disabled and low-income veterans.
PHOTO BY CHARLIE NEUMAN



"IT MAKES A BIG DIFFERENCE."

Payton McMullin

Vietnam veteran, homeowner

McMullin was made aware of the benefit by Realtor Carla Farley. Part of a family steeped in military service, Farley has taken a special interest in connecting veterans with this benefit.

"A lot of veterans do not know about this," Farley said. "I am on a campaign to let them know and get them connected."

Farley has seen stories like McMullin's play out often, but not enough.

"That \$120 or \$150 can be the gas and light bill or the cellphone bill," she said. "For someone on a fixed income, it can make all the difference in the world."

For McMullin, it means life in a house he enjoys while he deals with the ongoing physical challenges of his injury and age. His current goal is to get workout equipment to achieve his fitness goals.

"Looking at the rough life I've had, I thought if I made it to 80, that would be a blessing," he said. "But, you know, my mother lived to be 96."

Applying for veteran property tax exemption

The Disabled Veterans Exemption for property tax in San Diego County provides a reduction in property taxes. Veterans can qualify two ways:

Basic exemption: For all veterans with 100 percent disability ratings or their unmarried surviving spouse.

Low-income exemption: For veterans in households earning less than \$60,000 a year. The amounts and income limits are adjusted annually for inflation. The basic exemption provides a savings of more than \$1,000 per year.

How to apply: Applicants should have their DD214 discharge with any rating other than dishonorable, and their letter from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs detailing their disability rating. New homebuyers should file by the end of the year of purchase. The exemption will renew automatically after that.

Online applications are available at sdarcc.com. In person assistance is available at the County Administration Center, 1600 Pacific Coast Highway, Room 103, in San Diego. For assistance or appointments: Phone (619) 531-5773 or email ARCCdvets@sdcounty.ca.gov.

Khe Sahn: One grunt's story

Surviving the siege

BY RODNEY OROSCO

Cpl. Bill Rider landed at Khe Sahn Combat Base two days after his 23rd birthday, Jan. 22, 1968. His unit was rushed to the base to prepare for an expected attack by the North Vietnamese. That attack would become a 77-day siege.

"We got there and began digging trenches," Rider said.

As squad leader, Rider was in charge of about 10 soldiers — men he was proud to fight with, but men he was hesitant to get too close with. "I learned not to get too close with my comrades as one never knew if the guy you were speaking with would last the day," he said.

The digging, the constant artillery barrages and the human carnage were nothing like the movies.

"I grew up on John Wayne movies," he said. "I had a desire to find out what combat was like."

That desire lead him to volunteer for the U.S. Marine Corps and become "your basic grunt."

Boot camp made him into a clenched-jaw warrior, so pulling guard duty at a submarine base in Virginia frustrated the young Marine.

"I kept bugging my commanding officer to let me go to Vietnam," he said. His commander was a bit wiser than the naive, eager young man. "My commander told me I could spend the war here." Rider was ardent for action.

"I told him I didn't want to miss out. What was the point of serving?" he said.

The war Rider witnessed included: enemy soldiers working their way through barbed wire in nothing but their underwear and a bomb, the enemy using elephants to pack in artillery and U.S. soldiers being wounded by their own re-supply air drop. There was no glory, only duty and horror.

"They dropped thousands and thousands of bombs on us," he recalled. "I would see guys blown up with nothing left but a pink mist."

It was not like the movies.

"Humans are not meant to see the carnage of war," he said.

On Oct. 25, 1968, the once-eager young soldier left Khe Sahn. He survived the siege. Suffering from malaria, dysentery

and wounded three times, the American warrior went home.

Rider went on to become a police officer, narcotics detective and start an executive security company in Hollywood. He lives in Carlsbad.

He is also co-founder of the veteran's support organization American Combat Veterans of War. With offices in La Jolla and Carlsbad, the organization "helps young soldiers recover from the trauma that is war," Rider says.

"HUMANS ARE NOT MEANT TO SEE THE CARNAGE OF WAR"

Cpl. Bill Rider
U.S. Marine Corps veteran



Growing up watching John Wayne movies didn't prepare U.S. Marine Corps veteran Bill Rider for the hard truth about war, which he experienced in the Battle of Khe Sahn, when a U.S. combat base was under siege by the North Vietnamese Army.

PHOTO BY CHARLIE NEUMAN

American Combat Veterans of War

Marine veteran Bill Rider knows the truth about war. He wants to help his brothers and sisters survive the trauma that happens after the war.

To do this, he created the American Combat Veterans of War (ACVOW). Based at the VA medical clinic in La Jolla, with an office in Carlsbad, the organization was founded to help soldiers deal with their PTSD.

Rider is quick to point out that "disorder" does not describe what happens to veterans. "It is not a disease they come back with. No human would be normal after war," he explains. "What they suffer is trauma."

Through the Safe Warrior Outreach program, ACVOW provides a weekly veterans support group to help returning veterans cope with that trauma.

The organization also sends veterans to the Vista jail once a week to mentor incarcerated veterans "and to let them know they are not alone and help them get back on track," Rider said.

For more information, visit the ACVOW website:
www.acvow.org

Serving Those Who Served

Those who wear the uniforms of the U.S. military are trained to work and fight as a unit. When those veterans come home, however, too many try to fight their battles alone.

The County of San Diego Office of Military & Veteran Affairs wants veterans to know they still belong to a unit that will not leave their side. The uniform may look different and the unit may be armed with computers, phones and the proper forms, but the dedication to achieving the mission is the same. The mission: To get veterans the benefits they have earned.



 **Call or Visit Today**

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5560 Overland Ave #310
San Diego, CA 92123
Phone: 858-694-3222
Hours: Monday-Friday 8 a.m.-4 p.m.

Military and Veterans Resource Center, South Region Live Well Center

401 Mile of Cars Way, Ste 300
National City, CA 91950
Phone: 619-731-3345
Hours: Monday-Friday 8 a.m.-5 p.m.

Military and Veterans Resource Center, North Inland Live Well Center

649 W. Mission Ave. #2400
Escondido, CA 92025
Phone: 760-740-5572 or 760-740-5573
Hours: Monday-Friday 8 a.m.-5 p.m.

Military and Veterans Resource Center, North Coastal Live Well Health Center

1701 Mission Ave., Ste 110
Oceanside, CA 92058
Phone: 442-262-2701
Hours: Monday-Friday 8 a.m.-5 p.m.



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