

Coming home

3 veterans tell 3 different tales of Vietnam

What have the attitudes of local people been like toward Vietnam veterans who returned to this area? What difficulties have veterans had here as a result of the war? Do they ever regret going to Vietnam? Would they go again? Who are some of these men and what are they doing with their lives today, 10 years after the end of America's involvement in Vietnam?

Special writer Victoria Diaz asked these questions as she focused on the lives of three Vietnam veterans: Robert Sayre of Livonia, Robert Cohen of Canton Township and James Myrold of Westland.

Diaz teaches writing classes at Schoolcraft College and Livonia and Southfield Community Education programs. She has a bachelor's degree in English from the University of Michigan-Dearborn and has written several feature stories along with book, movie and theater reviews for area newspapers and magazines.

She lives in Livonia with her husband and three sons.

By Victoria Diaz
special writer

In 1967, when Livonian Robert Sayre returned to the United States from a tour of duty in Vietnam, the first civilian he saw welcomed him home by spitting in his face and running away. "It gave me a new meaning," said Sayre, 36.

Although Sayre's experience may have been unusual, it was not unique. To say the least, most Vietnam veterans were not welcomed home as heroes. Some experienced outright hostility. Others met with indifference. Many came home to find that those who had refused to go to Vietnam were accorded a more heroic status in their community than the GI who had actually fought.

"I have no regrets about going," said Sayre. Confined to a wheelchair since a post-Vietnam auto accident in 1967, Sayre is a full-time student at Madonna College, working toward a degree in journalism and public relations. "I'd go again, if I could."

Drafted just out of Garden City High School in 1965, he spent 11 months in Vietnam driving a truck.

"But I never talk about the war with my neighbors. It's a subject that's avoided like the plague. I'm the only Vietnam veteran in my neighborhood. All of the rest of the men are about my age, but they went to college instead of Vietnam. I thought that was cowardly then, and I still think it's cowardly. The 12 years I've lived there, none of the men or women has ever mentioned Vietnam."

SAYRE, WHO is divorced and shares a home with his parents, said he has no plans to work after graduation. After being discharged from the Army, he worked full time for 13 months at the Veterans Administration offices in Detroit, dispensing occupational and educational information to veterans. He claims he liked the job, the interaction with veterans, but eventually had to quit because "it was costing me too much money."

"Millions, I would go out and make \$12-15,000 a year, I lose a lot more money than I make. I have my Social Security, my insurance policy; it's just not worth it to me."

In his spare time, Sayre pursues an interest in photography by working as a darkroom lab assistant at Madonna. He also is a coin collector. Presently, he's not involved with any veterans' organizations in the area. "I went to a couple of VFW meetings. I'd be asked a question about being a Vietnam veteran, but before I could answer, they'd start telling me about their war experiences, and could care less about what happened to me. I thought, 'This is crazy.' So I didn't go back."

"One night, I went to the Bamboo Rap (a Vietnam veterans counseling service on Seven Mile Road). There were maybe four or five guys there, and they all started telling their stories. One said, 'I was back a week, then I got busted.' They had all been in trouble with the law within the first week to a month after they'd come back from Vietnam. When it got to be my turn, I said, 'Damn, do I feel out of place. It took me till last summer to get my first traffic ticket.'"

"I probably would've had trouble with the law, though, if I hadn't been in the automobile accident," said Sayre, who said he experienced the Post-Vietnam Stress Syndrome. "It was mean when I came home. I don't know exactly why I was mean; I guess the circumstances over there just made me mean. I was mean over there, too. I don't still feel that way. I can't afford to. I don't want to. The accident took care of that. So I think I was lucky."

ROBERT COHEN, 37, of Canton believes that his stint in Vietnam changed his life for the better.

"I'm glad I went," said the former Navy medic who often accompanied Marine outfits on patrol near Da Nang. "I thought it was a good experience. Of course, I was scared the whole time I was there. But it gave me a lot of insight, and some traits I didn't have before I went. I have a lot more persistence, more confidence in myself, more endurance."

"I've not encountered any kind of prejudice or hostility in this community because I fought in Vietnam. That's never happened to me here. I don't know if it's because I was a medic and people thought I wasn't on the front line, or was neutral or something. But I had a weapon that I carried, and I felt, at the time, if I had to shoot somebody, I would have to defend myself or the people I was with."

Since his return in 1967, Cohen has earned a master's degree in biology from South Connecticut State College in New Haven, Conn., plus another master's in business administration from Central Michigan University. After having been wounded in 1966, Cohen experienced several symptoms

of the Stress Syndrome. "I still have the nightmares about being shot," he said. "They do seem less frequent, but I still get them. When I was in school in Connecticut, I talked to a psychologist in the psychology department about the dreams. He said, 'They'll never go away, not until they're replaced by something more severe.'"

Now an engineer with Ford Motor Co., Cohen is married and the father of two sons. Occasionally, he writes poetry, most of it about his experiences in Vietnam.

JAMES MYROLD, 33, of Westland enlisted in the Army at 17 and later volunteered for duty in Vietnam. "I guess I didn't know any better," he said. "Today I just couldn't bear arms against anyone. I've changed a lot since I volunteered. Now I wouldn't own a gun. I don't want anything to do with killing. And I can't blame the guys who wouldn't go."

Recently laid off from his job as a welder at Portec Rail Division in Novi, Myrold said his status as a Vietnam veteran helped him to get a job when he returned to the area in 1968. "I've never had anybody spit on me, or anything like that, for serving in Vietnam. Nobody's ever thanked

me for going, but I've never felt unappreciated. Why should they thank me. For trying to kill people? I don't have a 'Vietnam Veteran' bumper sticker on my car, either. If I put a bumper sticker on my car, people would say, 'Big Deal.'"

"While I was over there, I did the best I could, and I had a good military record. But when they wanted me to re-enlist, I told them, 'No, I've had enough of it. I can't take it anymore. I'm sick of the gunfire every day. I'm sick of my buddies getting killed. I don't need this.'"

Married, and the father of two daughters, Myrold relaxes by fishing, playing baseball and softball, reading the Bible, and watching television.

He said he's not experienced Post-Vietnam Stress Syndrome, although he does claim to have been a "nervous wreck" when he first returned home 14 years ago.

"I've had a couple of bad dreams," he said. "But just a couple. Mostly, I just try to forget about the war. It's in my past. I look at my future. I asked a guy today if he'd been in the service. He said, 'Yeah, but I didn't see Vietnam.' I said, 'Well, you didn't miss anything.'"



MARGENE JOHNSTON/staff photographer

Confined to a wheelchair since a post-Vietnam auto accident in 1967, Robert Sayre is a full-time student at Madonna College, working toward a degree in journalism and public relations. In his spare time, Sayre pursues an interest in photography by working as a darkroom lab assistant at Madonna.

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Persons between the ages of 7-13 are invited to join the Bill Koch Cross Country Ski League. It will meet at the Glen Oaks Golf Course Ski Center on Jan. 15 and 22 at 9:30 a.m., and again on Feb. 5, 12 and 19, at the same time.

Fee is \$23, which includes ski rental or \$13 with your own skis. In addition, a club ski festival will be Feb. 26. For further information, call the Farmington Hills Parks and Recreation offices at 474-6115.

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