

Suburban Life

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Reflections

Vets remember fighting times

VETERANS Day is not just a day off from work for federal employees. More importantly, it's a solemn day to remember. It's a time to remember the American men and women who paid the ultimate price — who gave their lives — in far-off lands in pursuit of freedom. And it's a day to salute the survi-

vors of fighting — those hardy souls who served their country in battle, then came home in hopes of regaining the lives of peace they once knew.

U.S. veterans now total 22 million. Honoring America's war dead and war veterans is an annual rite that goes back to Armistice Day, first celebrated in 1919. In recognition of Veterans Day

'87, which was Wednesday, Nov. 11, the Observer interviewed four veterans, one each from World War I, World War II, the Korean Conflict and the Vietnam War.

Their memories, in their own words, paint gripping portraits that even time hasn't faded. — Bob Sklar editor

Clair Thurston World War I

By Chris Rizk
staff writer

CLAIR THURSTON remembers few things about the war. He went because it was patriotic and he came back because he was lucky.

Other than that, everything remains fuzzy. Thurston, who lives at the Farmington Hills Inn, turned 88 years old last month. That would have made him about 16 years old when he enlisted in the first big war, World War I.

His memories have since faded of a time during his youth spent overseas. But he doesn't apologize. He simply reminds the interviewer that

he is old and that he doesn't remember much.

Facts are hard to elicit and even harder to verify about Thurston's stint in the infantry. He says he went over to England after enlisting in 1915. Family members refute that and say it was probably in 1916.

After England, Thurston was transferred to France. His memory picks up around that time and he remembers "getting drunk."

His daughter-in-law, Nancy, gently scolded him and reminded him that he once spoke of patriotism as a prime reason for enlisting. "That's right," he said. "I went because I be-

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Clair Thurston
Farmington Hills



photos by RANDY BOHST/staff photographer

Michigan's first memorial to POWs and MIAs from the Vietnam War is at Oakland Hills Memorial Gardens chapel/mausoleum in Novi. The bronze and granite memorial lists 84 names. The list includes the name of Thomas F. Riggs of Farmington. He was listed as mis-

sing June 11, 1967. The 20-year-old Army chief warrant officer was piloting a Huey helicopter. He was with Staff Sgt. James Nelson of Ludington when their chopper was lost in the night in an electrical storm.

Florence Viergutz World War II

By Joanne Maliszewski
staff writer

THE UNITED States had been at war with Germany and Japan for almost two years when Florence Viergutz signed up for the U.S. Army Nurse Corps in 1943.

"I never want to see another war. There's nothing romantic about it, really," said the Farmington Hills resident.

"I can remember one young man. He was 26, just married. He was blind and he wanted me to write his wife a letter. She didn't know he was blind. I sat there trying to write that letter. But I didn't want him to know

I was crying," Viergutz said. A registered nurse at a general hospital 100 miles outside London, Viergutz didn't have to be on the war's front lines to know about devastation. The broken and maimed bodies of American GIs, most of them fairly young men, was enough to convince Viergutz that war is a terrible thing.

From battles on the many European fronts, the patients arrived, first by train and later by plane, at the 1,000-bed hospital, known as 216th General.

"They were so messed up. They

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Florence Viergutz
Farmington Hills

Fred Esser Korean Conflict

By Lorraine McClish
staff writer

FRED ESSER thinks of the Korean Conflict as "The Silent War." "We went in silently. We came home silently. I'm not sure if anybody really knew we were gone," he said.

"My folks knew. All of my letters back home were on the bright side, always reassuring. But most of us there believed that not many people either knew or cared."

It wasn't a time of burning your draft cards. It wasn't fashionable to go to Canada to avoid the draft. "Your number was called and you went," he said.

On Christmas Eve 1953, Esser went to Fort Custer for eight weeks of basic training.

He typed his way to Korea. "I found out fast that there weren't many guys in the Army who could type. They held me up every step of the way for some typing jobs so it took me almost a year to get to Korea," the Farmington Hills resident said.

Once there, he learned that instead of typist, his designation was court reporter.

ESSER'S MOST vivid recollection of that time was "the stench."

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Fred Esser
Farmington Hills

Ed Johnson Vietnam War

By Casey Hens
staff writer

SOMETIMES MUGGY, mosquito-filled Michigan summer nights remind him of Southeast Asia. It's just for the moment.

But the decorated Army combat veteran, who was drafted to serve his country during the Vietnam War, has come to terms with his years of memories and nightmares.

Ed Johnson, a Farmington Hills resident, knows he has to deal with bad memories. But he also remembers friendships and a special kind of teamwork that was present in Vietnam.

There isn't a day that goes by when I don't say Vietnam 100 times

a day," he said. "You never get fully over Vietnam, but you learn to cope

Johnson began his coping process in 1991, when personal tragedy struck. He lost his brother and his job in the same week. With the help of private counseling and the support of his wife, Johnson sought help and dealt with his life.

TODAY, HE is a member of the Oakland County Chapter of the Vietnam Veterans of America. And he is itching to complete a Vietnam documentary, build a memorial to Michigan Vietnam vets and maybe someday write a book.

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Ed Johnson
Farmington Hills

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