Esser

Continued from Page 1

"The Koreans use human waste for their fertilizer. The stench never left. It permeated everything. It was there the minute we got off the plane from Tokyo. It was always there," he said.

Running parallel with that memory was the Korean children, whom he called "the real victims of the war."

"There wasn't a lot of time to go sight-seeing. I was being flown all over the peninsula from one court marshal to another," he said.

"But I could depend on getting Sunday morning off to go to church. On those walks to church, there were always the orphans, always the young ones with dirt and grime so thick on their faces it cracked.

"We always gave them something, whatever we had, but it was never enough. And there were always too many of them," he said.

But Esser and four other soldiers, all court stenographers billeted together, were able to help one Korean.

"He was our house boy," Esser said.

"He used to ask us to pay him with cigarettes so we knew there was a little black marketing going on. He was an uncommonly good kid, a smart kid, ambitious and a very good chess player. The five us of were able to arrange to send him to school. I know that was a good investment."

ESSER, THE immediate past post commander of Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 2269 in Farmington Hills, now invests his spare time with several groups devoted to finding information on prisoners of war and those missing in action.

"There are more unaccounted for from the Korean Police Action — as they call it — than there are from any other war," Esser said.

"From the Vietnam war — or conflict, or whatever you want to call it — there are 2,400 MIAs or POWs listed. From Korea, 8,000," he said "And the concentration is more on Vietnam, for no other reason than that the information might be a little fresher, a little easier to get.

"We want to do what we can before they're forgotten altogether. We put pressure where we can," he said.

Esser is eager to assure that men in the veterans' hospitals aren't forgotten.

"Once a month we go to the hospitals to bring a party, play bingo, give out as many prizes as we can," he said. "Those hospital rooms don't have numbers on them. They have the patients' names written on them That's their home. They are there to stay."

A couple of times each year, those patients "come to us, a bus-full of them, just for a good dinner, a party, a night out," he added. "Somewhere along the line, vets' organizations got the stereotype of being a bunch of beer-drinking conventioneers. It's not so."

For example, he said, the VFW sponsors a home for veterans and their children who need a place to go.

"We also have projects and programs for the poverty stricken and the sick vet. We give scholarships. We work so those who have died and those who were maimed are not forgotten."

Viergutz

Continued from Page 1

were hungry," Viergutz said. "We had them coming in from the bad battles in Belgium. Almost all of them had bone destruction. They were in casts and traction. That was quite an awakening."

MEMORIES OF the war and her work have long stayed with Viergutz, who joins old Army hospital friends once a year for a reunion.

Veterans Day celebrations are important to her because U.S. soldiers should be honored, Viergutz said. "I feel more sorry for the vets from Korea and Vietnam, who didn't come home to the same glory. We came home to a lot of good things."

Viergutz volunteered for the nurse corps after her brother was drafted. "Well, I figured I might as well get in it. I just didn't know it was going to be so rough. But I enjoyed it because I felt I was doing something."

She entered the nurse corps as a second lieutenant and was sent to Ft. Sheridan, Ill., for three months. "All the time, we were getting set to go overseas, a thousand of us — nurses and others attached to the hospital."

The one thing Viergutz knew for sure was that she didn't want to be a field nurse in makeshift hospitals near the front lines. She wasn't witness to the bombings and the battles, but a two year-stint in an Army hospital gave her a firsthand glimpse of war's tragedies.

BUT THERE was no doubt in her mind when the Allies began plans for D-Day. "We knew when D-Day was coming. Planes were practicing. We saw more and more of them. We had that feeling it was coming that first week of June. We could here the planes practice day and night."

A graduate of Detroit's Grace Hospital, Viergutz was a night supervisor, though she often worked other shifts. Armed with a flashlight, she made rounds twice a night. "I would work a whole month with one night off. It was 12-hour duty."

The barracks she shared with seven other nurses was near the 1,000-bed Quonset hut hospital.

Life and work could get tough, and often did. "But if you really had a bad day, you could go to the latrine and shout," Viergutz said.

In the midst of the fray, the Army was still the Army. Discipline and obedience ruled the day. "We stood inspection. You never knew when we were going to have an inspection The generals and field officers would come. But they never looked at the patients. They looked at the floors."

Following her work in England Viergutz was shipped to Verdun where barbed wire still stood from World War I. When Germany surrendered, Viergutz was sent to Stuttgart, where she remained until she was shipped home.

IN HEAVILY bombed Stuttgart she worked at an occupation hospital, which she soon discovered was inundated with underground tunnels "You knew how well prepared they were from 1939."

The end of the war with Germany signaled Viergutz's time to go home "We just jumped for joy. All we wanted to think about was getting home."

Some of her collegues delayed their trip home and volunteered for the continuing war in the South Pacific.

After a bit of a wait, Viergutz's turn to board a ship headed for America came on Christmas Eve, 1945. The nine-day crossing was no joy. "The waves came over the sides of the ship. But I survived being seasick."

When she arrived home in Detroit, things had changed. And she knew she'd be faced with a big adjustment She packed her backs and headed for California to work in a veteran's hospital. Nine months of that brought her back to Detroit.

Though World War II veterans returned to celebrations and fanfare, many returned to unemployment and a rough road ahead.

"I'm sure they did have problems unless they had special college degrees. Some went in so young . . . At the time, there was a shortage of nurses. But I was at loose ends finding out what I wanted."

Johnson

Continued from Page 1

He is working with another Oakland County veteran to begin an Outreach Center for veterans, to give them the same help he was lucky enough to get. Johnson helps people in his everyday life as a vocational therapist at New Horizons in Novi.

He served in the U.S. Army 47th Infantry Regiment, 9th Infantry Division, where he saw combat both in Vietnam and Kampuchea, the country west of Vietnam that was formerly called Cambodia.

Most of his two-year Army stint was spent in heavy combat.

His combat accomplishments earned him numerous medals, including the Bronze Star for valor, four Army Commendation Medals for meritorious service and valor, and the Air Medal for participating in 25 aerial missions in a little more than three months.

He also brought home a Combat Infantryman's Badge for surviving in continuous combat for an extended time. He also won several other awards from both the United States and the Republic of Vietnam.

Johnson came home in the 1970s to the same friends, but he knew his life would never be the same.

"There was a line between you; you were more mature somehow," he explained. "After sleeping out in the paddy dikes, you think everybody should go through that, so they can appreciate a hot shower and a cold glass of water."

HE CAME through the 72 hours of required Army scrutiny from the time he was discharged until he got home. A brief, four-hour chat with a Veterans Administration psychiatrist when he got home, and Johnson was free to continue his life as a civilian.

"I basically wanted nothing to do with the government; I wanted to go put on some Levis and look up some friends and forget about it," Johnson said. "And that's about what I did."

Now that Vietnam veterans are finding each other again in groups such as the VVA, they remember the bond that has held them together all these years, Johnson said.

"They were stronger, smarter, brighter — they were a team," he added. "You really watched out for each other as much as you could."

That bond is still there.

Johnson spent Veterans Day 1987 in Washington, D.C., with other veterans from the VVA Oakland County group. He plans to meet with some war buddies and views the Washington experience as an important thing in his life.

"Vets are hanging together," he added. "They don't want to see another Vietnam happen."

Thurston

Continued from Page 1

lieved in my country."

ISSUES, BACK then, said his daughter-in-law, were not so confusing. You knew what you were fighting for and you just went. No arguing, no refusing.

"My father-in-law used to say that the most important thing that anybody could be was an American and to not go and fight was unheard of back then," Nancy said.

Thurston nodded in agreement. He may not be clear on details but the theme of patriotism has remained strong: He went to war because that's what young men did back then.

Thurston's was accompanied on his trip overseas by his two brothers, Wendel and Ammon, who enlisted in the Marines. A third brother, George, sneaked in at the young age of 13.

He doesn't remember his mother's reaction to watching all her boys go off to war, Nancy does.

"I remember Mrs. Thurston talking about how hard it was to watch four of her five kids enlist," she said. "She took that real hard."

Some parts of the war, apparently, were harder than other parts for Thurston.

FAMILY MEMBERS remember his "after war" speeches on finishing all their food at meal times because "you should see what they served in the Army."

Thurston's brother, Ammon, remembers the war more vividly.

Stationed in France in 1914, Ammon slept on a wooden bed with straw, a situation he soon grew accustomed to. Life was rough for the doughboys, he said. The troops often went without soap, toilet paper and candy.

"But we always got our ration of tobacco," Ammon said. "We got our $15-a-month checks and a package of tobacco."

Compared to life in the armed services, life was good for all four boys after the war, both men agreed.