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of Vietnam vets would actually take advantage of such attention. It would take some persuasion, perhaps the kind of campaign Robertson is embarking on.

Reluctant

"The majority of the guys don't want to come out," said Grant Riddell, who served during 1969-70 and is now a maintenance worker at Farmington High School. "It's a war that everybody is trying to forget. But not everybody is. Me and a few old boys don't want to forget it because it's part of history and that's part of our lives. Too many guys got killed or wounded to forget the sit."

Riddell said he would participate "in a heartbeat" in a Vietnam tribute.

Such a program won't happen this year, however. With the American Legion-hosted parade less than two months away, Kenny's parents will have to start planning for next year's proceedings.

This year's parade, set for Monday, May 29, will feature hundreds of Korean War veterans, marching down Grand River to celebrate the 50th anniversary. The Korner Barber, at Grand River-Farmington Road, will feature a Korean War display, although Robertson was hoping that Kenny's Vietnam uniforms might also fit into the window case. And during the post-parade ceremony at Memorial Park, it isn't expected that Kenny and others like him will receive an official nod, either.

According to Wally Christensen of the Farmington-based American Legion Walker-Grove post, Vietnam will get its fair share of recognition during the 2001 Memorial Day parade. He emphasized that, after giving it serious thought, it wouldn't have been right to have both the Kore-

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an and Vietnam wars share the holiday stage.

"I don't think the Korean War veterans should have to share the spotlight on their 50th anniversary," Christensen said. "... But there's no way we'd ever shun the Vietnam War. We have commanders in our post who went to Vietnam."

Christensen said Robertson is "pushing the issue pretty hard because it's her son. I don't blame her one bit. I want to do something (this year) and yet I don't want to do something just to appease somebody."

And, while Kenny's parents will have to look to the future, Christensen is eagerly anticipating this year's program.

"This is the first time we've had any luck getting the Korean War vets out of the woodwork," Christensen said. "Can you picture 300-to-500 Korean War vets walking down Grand River in groups of 25, with white hats on? It's going to be reality."

Still hurts

This year's Memorial Day rightfully belongs to the Korean War. But that doesn't lessen the sting for Vietnam veterans and their surviving loved ones. It is why Kenny's parents won't rest until they see a release on their 30 years of pent-up frustration. Although the late 1980s rise of the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C., chipped away at the solid rock of American indifference, the beginning of the 21st century isn't without a residue that both Robertson and Roy Williams Sr. want to wipe clean.

Last week, Helen and Roy, both in their 70s, reiterated the need for Vietnam War vets to finally get some credit. And that goes for their son, Kenny, who

died on June 25, 1969, when the Cobra Jet Helicopter Gun Ship he was piloting was shot down into the rice paddies of Vietnam.

Kenny was a newby of four months, and not even 20 years old yet when he was killed.

"Why do we have a Memorial Day parade if all of our veterans won't (come out)?" Robertson asked. "It's supposed to be honoring all of our wars, all of our veterans. That's why we need an appeal."

But Roy Sr., who fought during World War II, conceded that it would be difficult to persuade Vietnam War vets to participate in a parade or ceremonies. Veterans aren't particularly eager to be reminded of the past.

"It (the war) is just something you don't talk about if you've been in it," he said. "The experiences are such that you don't talk about it."

Looking back

Kenny's parents looked through some old scrapbooks, which included photos, letters and the official notice of their son's death. Although they were verbally informed of the tragedy on June 25, the Western Union telegram didn't arrive until June 28.

"I fully expected him to return," Robertson said. "Someone asked me at my work, 'How could you let him go?' I said, 'He's smart and he won't let anything happen to him.' But he was in action, and in enemy fire."

Their son enlisted shortly after graduation along with a handful of high school buddies. The others only served their scheduled stint in the Infantry. But Kenny opted to continue his military career.

Robertson looked at a snapshot of Kenny with his enlistee buddies. "All of them were his palbearers."



STAFF PHOTO BY BILL DECKER

History: Grant Riddell, who served in Vietnam in 1969-70, often lectures on that war to students at Farmington High School, which he attended as a youth and where he now is employed as a maintenance worker.

If memories ever flicker, all they have to do is pop in a video featuring the American Red Cross "Donut Dollies," volunteers such as Emily Strange, who later became a renowned poet and author. During the video, Strange talked about making a point to not get to "connect the names and the faces" of veterans, as self-protection whenever inevitable news of deaths would occur.

But young Kenny Robertson was different, enough that Strange wrote a poem about him, simply titled "Kenny."

"You can give a kid a Corvette, but they can give Kenny a Cobra helicopter with mini-rockets," said Strange, during the video.

"He was just wide-eyed and thrilled to death ... He was a good kid. When I came home from a run I found out he was gone."

Gone and too often forgotten - at least until the memorial wall of names went up, which Robertson said has helped to soften the stance of some about the Vietnam War. At the local level, Farmington High School's media center does have a plaque and a section of books donated a

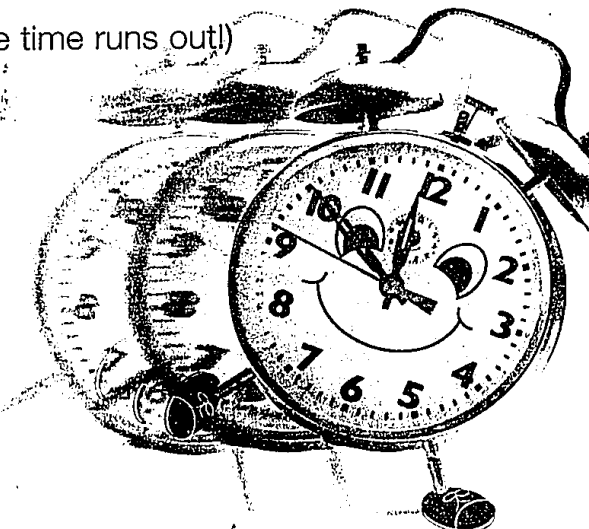
decade ago in Kenny's memory.

Now it is time to move that positive momentum forward.

"The vets are 50 years old now," Robertson said. "How old are they going to have to be before they're recognized?"

For those Vietnam veterans who want to remain anonymous, Kenny's mother said they ought to "remember their country and their comrades who didn't return. And honor their memory."

(Hurry in before time runs out!)



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