

Vietnam War remembered

By William Baltz

This is the first in a two-part series on the war, which ended 40 years ago today. Local veterans and residents recall that bitter conflict and its impact both at home and abroad.

On April 30, 1975, throngs of panic-stricken civilians stormed the U.S. embassy in Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam, in a desperate bid to escape from the North Vietnamese Army advancing with tanks. In a frantic and harrowing evacuation, helicopters airlifted the last Marine security guards from the embassy's rooftop to safety aboard the USS Okinawa waiting offshore. Above the former South Vietnamese presidential palace, the victorious communists raised their flag.

The Vietnam War was over.

George Yung of Three Rivers remembers that day. Like millions of other Americans, he watched television news reports of the U.S. evacuation. He thought of the more than 58,000 Americans who died fighting there and also the South Vietnamese he met while serving in 1966 as a Naval radio operator dispatching river patrol boats.

"I wondered what would happen to them," he recalls. "I felt we let them down."

The war had spanned three decades of brutal fighting, first by French colonial forces ousted by the Viet Minh and later by America to prevent a communist conquest of the fragile Republic of Vietnam — a conflict viewed by U.S. policy makers as part of a larger geopolitical struggle against the Soviet Union and Red China, which supported North Vietnam and its Viet Cong insurgents operating in the south.

Forty years later the war's repercussions are still felt by veterans suffering from physical and psychological wounds, those who mourn loved ones lost in that long and bloody ordeal, and by those who draw comparisons with America's involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan.

There has been an ongoing debate about who "lost" Vietnam as well. From a military perspective, American forces were victorious against the communists in every major battle. A political solution, however, remained elusive. Growing public dissatisfaction with a protracted and costly war eventually caused the United States to wind down and end its direct combat support in 1973. Left to fend for itself against a more powerful foe, the fate of South Vietnam was sealed.

"We should have stayed," says Vandalia resident Les Thieme, who served in the 20th Engineer Battalion constructing roads and bases supporting America's military build up in the mid-1960s. He believes that when the United States abandoned South Vietnam to the communists, all the gains that had been made were lost. As a result, U.S. soldiers who gave their lives there "died for nothing."

The problem, however, was the South Vietnamese government had weak popular support — largely due to corruption — and the enemy was tenacious. "I had great respect for them as a fighting force," says Marcellus resident Wilber Breseman, who fought against VC and North Vietnam Army troops as a "grunt" in the field. (see side bar)

Nation building

Six U.S. presidents grappled with the thorny issue of Vietnam beginning with Harry Truman and ending with Gerald Ford. Robert F. Kennedy's decision in the early 1960s to significantly increase economic aid and military advisors assisting South Vietnam followed by Lyndon Johnson's move to commit an ever-escalating amount of American forces reached a high point of 550,000 troops stationed there in 1969.

After colonial powers began losing their foreign territories following World War II, America stepped in to counter communist ideology and insurgencies filling the vacuum. Nation building was seen as a way to create stable democratic countries that could also serve as a bulwark against potential Soviet and Chinese expansion.

"The problem is that different cultures don't always see the world — or even life — the same way we do," says Kent Drake, whose unit was attached to the 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized) manning tanks near the Demilitarized Zone separating the two warring countries where he was severely wounded by shrapnel from a land mine in 1970. He points out that it is difficult to grow strong democracies in places where there is no democratic tradition and where much of the population is more concerned with subsistence living than politics.

"But our soldiers fought well and did their job. There were atrocities on both sides. War is never clean."

The war's human and economic toll was staggering. Estimates range from two to four million civilians killed. Massive U.S. bombing campaigns destroyed much of North Vietnam's infrastructure hoping such punishment would force its leader, Ho Chi Minh, to negotiate a peaceful settlement. The conflict created a refugee crisis of enormous proportions and after the communist takeover thousands of South Vietnamese wound up in forced labor camps or perished at sea trying to flee their homeland by boat. Famine and disease engulfed the entire region and the communist Khmer Rouge who overran Cambodia exterminated two million people in a genocidal purge. In the end, the war cost the United States

almost a trillion dollars in today's terms.

A new kind of war

It was the first time U.S. forces used "search and destroy" missions to suppress a widespread guerrilla insurgency. "It was frustrating because you're supposed to take and hold ground," says Drake. "We would take ground and then leave. I imagined the enemy waving good-bye to us saying 'we'll be back.'"

Indeed, the military's role in Vietnam was complex and tricky: Fight both a conventional and guerrilla war, equip and train the South Vietnamese Army and win the "hearts and minds" of the populace with humanitarian projects to bolster government support. In addition, U.S. commanders had to comply with strict rules of engagement that many complained were strategically and tactically counterproductive.

"The politicians should have let the military do what it needed to do," says Three Rivers resident Ed Mull, who served with 1st Marine Aircraft Wing stationed at the Chu Lai Air Base in 1967. "We needed permission to shoot back. It was crazy."

American troops fought in mountains, jungles, swamps, searing heat and monsoons. They endured ambushes, booby traps, capture and torture, infectious diseases, and a host of hardships where it was often difficult to distinguish friend from foe.

"In Vietnam you didn't know who was who," says Andy Conklin, commander of VFW Post 4054 in Marcellus. He interacted extensively with South Vietnamese villagers during his tour in the U.S. Army. "You could pick up a Vietnamese kid and give him a ride somewhere. Later that night he could throw a satchel charge in your hooch." He adds that many villagers had no choice but to join the VC or be killed by them.

"The wounded came to us with faces disfigured by shrapnel, amputated arms or legs, and blind," recalls Three Rivers resident Nancy Bell about her internship at Chicago's Edward Hines, Jr. VA Hospital treating American soldiers blinded in combat. "What I remember most is, despite their horrible wounds, how grateful they were to be alive and wanted to move on."

Many veterans, however, discovered that "moving on" entailed yet another challenge: Facing scorn or indifference for their service when they returned home to a nation deeply divided over the war.

"I was more scared to come back to the states," recounts Thieme. "At least in Vietnam I knew who the enemy was. When I got back, I was accused of being a baby killer. I didn't kill anyone. It hurt."



Finding enemy troops

Wilber Breseman of Marcellus served a nine-month tour in Vietnam. He was a foot soldier in the field who had the harrowing and dangerous job of finding and killing enemy troops before they could kill him.

Photo provided by William Baltz

Life as a grunt in Vietnam

By William Baltz

"When a civilian asks me what it was like in Vietnam you can never really explain the things you went through, but you were extremely tired all the time. You got very little sleep and you were extremely scared," recalls Marcellus resident Wilber Breseman about his nine-month tour in Vietnam. "It was almost like you were in an auto accident and you saw your life flash before you and your adrenaline is going and you are shaking. That's about what it was like every day in Vietnam."

Breseman was known as a grunt — a foot soldier in the field who had the harrowing and dangerous job of finding and killing enemy troops before they could kill him. "People think that grunt is a derogatory term. It isn't and I'm proud to have been one," he says during a conversation at VFW Post 4054 in Marcellus — a place dear to his heart ever since its members welcomed him "with open arms" after he returned home in 1969 at a time when other Americans denounced his service.

In 1968, at age 19, he served with Bravo Company, 1st Battalion, 50th Infantry, operating in the Mang Yang Pass area of Vietnam's Central Highlands, a rugged terrain featuring thick jungle, fields of razor sharp elephant grass and towering mountains. The Viet Minh had virtually annihilated an entire battalion of crack French colonial troops there 1954. He saw their grave site on the side of a hill, a grim reminder of the communist victory.

As a squad and later platoon leader, Breseman faced the same tenacious guerrilla fighters only now they were better equipped. In addition, he was up against highly trained North Vietnam Army units. He had three main jobs, each one a month long: protecting convoys and bridges, and conducting search and destroy missions.

A typical mission would start by flying in a Huey helicopter and dropping off in artillery range of a forward base camp. Patrolling in the field for 20 to 30 days often entailed trail blazing with machetes through dense vegetation. "In the jungle you couldn't see more than 10 feet in any direction. There were booby traps everywhere," he says. Every third night, Breseman and his men would set up an ambush hoping to surprise enemy troops. "A night ambush was one of the most terrifying experiences of my life. When you fire at night, with the first round you're completely blind because you get the flash off the muzzle," he recalls, stressing that this type of intense combat occurred at extremely close range.

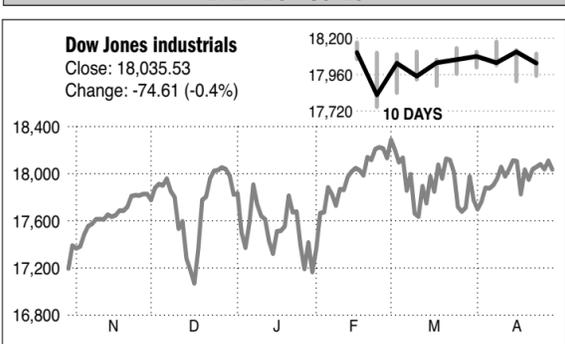
Breseman encountered a variety of exotic and lethal creatures including tigers, wild boars and pythons. "Once, crawling through the jungle on my belly, a large king cobra rose up two feet in front of me and spread its hood. I was so close to NVA I could hear them talking. After several long seconds it backed off and crawled away." He humped an 80-pound rucksack up and down mountains in humid, 110-degree heat.

Through the years, Breseman has helped make the post's museum a remarkable collection of military relics and displays. On one wall, is a frame containing his medals including the Bronze Star. He points to the Combat Infantryman Badge. "That's the one I'm most proud of," he says. "Once a grunt, always a grunt."

"The war had spanned three decades of brutal fighting."

THE MARKET IN REVIEW

DAILY DOW JONES



STOCKS OF LOCAL INTEREST

Name	Ex	Div	Yld	PE	Last	Chg	%Chg	YTD	Name	Ex	Div	Yld	PE	Last	Chg	%Chg	YTD
AT&T Inc	NY	1.88	5.4	32	34.76	-10	+3.5		HomeDp	NY	2.36	2.2	23	108.71	-1.87	+3.6	
AbbottLab	NY	.96	2.0	17	47.17	-42	+4.8		Intel	NA	.96	2.9	14	32.88	-1.4	-9.4	
AmAxe	NY	13	24.97	+16	+10.5		JohnJn	NY	3.00	3.0	18	100.39	-35	-4.0	
AEP	NY	2.12	3.7	17	57.79	-29	-4.8		Kadant	NY	.68	1.3	19	53.00	-1.55	+24.2	
BP PLC	NY	2.40	5.5	36	43.59	+11	+14.3		Kellogg	NY	1.96	3.1	33	63.38	-2.9	-3.1	
Cisco	NA	.84	2.9	18	29.05	-27	+5.2		McDnids	NY	3.40	3.5	21	97.02	+1.9	+3.5	
CocaCola	NY	1.32	3.3	26	40.49	-28	-4.1		Microsoft	NA	1.24	2.5	20	49.06	-10	+5.6	
ConAgra	NY	1.00	2.7	...	36.41	-58	+4		Oracle	NY	.60	1.3	19	44.73	+23	-5	
Disney	NY	1.15	1.0	24	109.81	-11	+16.6		PepsiCo	NY	2.62	2.8	22	94.38	-0.4	-2	
Eaton	NY	2.20	3.2	18	69.54	+93	+2.3		Perrigo	NY	.50	.3	83	184.74	-1.65	+10.5	
ExxonMbl	NY	2.92	3.32	12	87.87	+07	-5.0		Pfizer	NY	1.12	3.3	24	34.29	-1.9	+11.1	
FifthThird	NA	.52	2.6	12	20.08	+26	-1.4		Stryker	NY	1.38	1.5	48	94.32	-7.8	0.0	
FordM	NY	.60	3.7	21	16.02	+11	+3.4		VerizonCm	NY	2.20	4.4	22	50.47	-0.8	-7.9	
GenElec	NY	.92	3.4	...	27.09	-03	+7.2		WalMart	NY	1.96	2.5	16	77.88	-1.22	+9.3	
HarleyD	NY	1.24	2.2	14	56.85	-08	-13.7		WalBoots	NA	1.35	1.6	33	84.57	-1.51	+11.0	
HewlettP	NY	.64	1.9	13	33.32	+08	-17.0		Wells Fargo	NY	1.50	2.7	14	55.46	+05	+1.2	

Stock Footnotes: g = Dividends and earnings in Canadian dollars. h = Does not meet continued-listing standards. If = Late filing with SEC. n = New in past 52 weeks. pf = Preferred. rs = Stock has undergone a reverse stock split of at least 50 percent within the past year. it = Right to buy security at a specified price. s = Stock has split by at least 20 percent within the last year. un = Units. vl = In bankruptcy or receivership. wd = When distributed. wi = When issued. wt = Warrants.
Mutual Fund Footnotes: b = Fee covering market costs is paid from fund assets. d = Deferred sales charge, or redemption fee. f = front load (sales charges). m = Multiple fees are charged. NA = not available. p = previous day's net asset value. s = fund split shares during the week. x = fund paid a distribution during the week. Source: The Associated Press. Sales figures are unofficial.

STOCK MARKET INDEXES

52-Week	High	Low	Name	Last	Net Chg	%Chg	YTD %Chg	12-mo %Chg
18,288.63	15,855.12		Dow Industrials	18,035.53	-74.61	-4.1	+1.9	+8.77
9,310.22	7,521.18		Dow Transportation	8,701.47	-108.88	-1.24	-4.80	+13.42
657.17	524.82		Dow Utilities	593.56	-1.10	-0.19	-3.97	+7.22
11,248.99	9,886.08		NYSE Composite	11,154.12	-48.97	-0.44	+2.90	+4.96
5,119.83	4,014.17		Nasdaq Composite	5,023.64	-31.78	-0.63	+6.07	+22.09
932.65	814.14		S&P 100	926.18	-2.68	-0.29	+1.96	+10.78
2,125.92	1,820.66		S&P 500	2,106.85	-7.91	-0.37	+2.33	+11.83
1,543.48	1,269.45		S&P MidCap	1,518.59	-8.38	-0.55	+4.55	+11.99
22,522.83	19,160.13		Wilshire 5000	22,277.02	-90.17	-0.40	+2.80	+11.61
1,278.63	1,040.47		Russell 2000	1,246.95	-12.41	-0.98	+3.51	+10.66

MUTUAL FUNDS

Name	Obj	Total Assets (\$Mlns)	NAV	4-wk	12-mo	5-year	Pct Load	Min Init	Invt
American Funds AMCAPA m	LG	25,524	29.39	+2.6	+15.2/D	+14.3/B	5.75	250	
American Funds AmBalA m	MA	47,846	25.14	+1.8	+9.5/A	+11.3/A	5.75	250	
American Funds BondA m	CI	19,024	12.88	+0.4	+4.0/C	+4.1/D	3.75	250	
American Funds CapIncBuA m	IH	70,620	61.35	+2.8	+6.7/A	+9.4/A	5.75	250	
American Funds CpWldGrIA m	WS	56,438	48.60	+2.7	+7.6/C	+10.2/C	5.75	250	
American Funds EurPacGrA m	FG	30,769	51.67	+3.1	+6.6/B	+7.7/C	5.75	250	
American Funds FnlInvA m	LB	44,447	53.59	+3.0	+13.4/C	+13.0/C	5.75	250	
American Funds GrthAmA m	LG	74,731	45.31	+2.7	+16.5/C	+13.5/C	5.75	250	
American Funds IncAmerA m	MA	73,699	22.05	+2.0	+7.2/D	+10.8/A	5.75	250	
American Funds InvCoAmA m	LB	58,355	38.00	+3.1	+12.8/C	+12.9/C	5.75	250	
American Funds MutualA m	LV	22,822	37.77	+2.5	+12.5/A	+12.9/B	5.75	250	
American Funds NewPerspA m	WS	37,576	39.20	+3.0	+11.9/A	+11.6/A	5.75	250	
American Funds WAMutlInvA m	LV	52,276	41.56	+2.0	+10.6/B	+13.9/A	5.75	250	
Federated EqInCA f	LV	1,094	24.07	+1.7	+7.1/E	+12.4/C	5.50	1,000	
FrankTemp-Templeton WorldA m	WS	5,271	18.24	+4.3	+10.4/E	+9.7/C	5.75	1,000	
Hartford BalC m	MA	147	21.34	+1.5	+9.7/A	+9.1/C	1.00	2,000	
Hartford HealthCarC m	SH	240	34.07	-0.9	+32.1/D	+21.1/C	1.00	2,000	
Lord Abbett AffiliatA m	LV	6,045	16.49	+2.2	+11.0/B	+10.6/E	5.75	1,000	
Lord Abbett AffiliatC m	LV	458	16.49	+2.2	+10.2/C	+9.9/E	1.00	1,000	
Lord Abbett BondDebA m	HY	4,835	8.12	+0.6	+5.3/A	+8.0/B	2.25	1,000	
Lord Abbett BondDebC m	HY	2,097	8.14	+0.6	+4.6/A	+7.3/C	1.00	1,000	
Lord Abbett MABalOppA m	MA	1,574	12.32	+2.0	+6.7/D	+8.6/C	2.25	1,500	
Putnam GeoPutA m	MA	1,020	17.32	+1.2	+10.8/A	+10.1/A	5.75	0	
Putnam GrowIncA m	LV	5,250	22.14	+3.0	+10.5	+13.0	5.75	0	
Putnam VoyagerA m	LG	3,551	31.90	+2.4	+16.3/C	+10.9/E	5.75	0	

CI - Intermediate-Term Bond, FB - Foreign Large Blend, IH - World Allocation, LB - Large Blend, LG - Large Growth, LV - Large Value, MA - Moderate Allocation, SH - Health, MU - Multisector Bond, WS - World Stock, Total Return: Chg in NAV with dividends reinvested. Rank: How fund performed vs. others with same objective: A is in top 20%, E in bottom 20%. Min Init Invt: Minimum \$ needed to invest in fund. Source: Morningstar.

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Brian K Ringle
Financial Advisor
756 South Us 131
Three Rivers, MI 49093
269-273-9332

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