



GOVERNMENT & POLITICS, IOWAWATCH

Memories From Vietnam War Still Raw For Some Of Its Iowa Veterans

by **Lyle Muller and Jeff Stein**

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The veterans memorial in Ryan, Iowa, on Wednesday, Nov. 8, 2017. Credit: Lyle Muller/IowaWatch

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Time slowly has healed some, but not all, of the wounds Vietnam War veterans in Iowa feel now even though more than 42 years have passed since the last soldiers, one of them an Iowan, died in that war.

“I feel like the young generations today don’t know what we went through when we came home,” Robert Boyd, who spent 15-and-a-half months in Vietnam during the war, said.

Boyd was referring to being greeted after serving overseas by a strong, nationwide anti-war movement. Demonstrations and riots were common, especially during spring semesters on some college campuses. Protests were held at the University of Iowa in Iowa City and Iowa State University in Ames to varying degrees from 1967 into the early 1970s.

“It was challenging to try to find a job,” Boyd, who calls Carroll his home but who also likes to travel and isn’t home that much, said. “We were looked down on. No one, really, wanted to have anything to do with us. I felt that the business people in the world should have had a chance to experience what we had to go through in Vietnam. I feel that they didn’t sympathize with us.”

That Boyd still thinks of that when asked in 2017 whether or not he feels support from Iowans for military veterans is telling. The memories stick, even though Boyd said he thinks Iowa does a good job of showing support for its veterans now, with state services that include the Iowa Veterans Home in Marshalltown.

The United States entered the Vietnam war by sending some advisers in 1955. It left in April 1975. Darwin Judge, a Marine lance corporal from Marshalltown, was one of the last two soldiers killed in Vietnam during the war. He was 19 when he and Cpl. Charles McMahon, 22, of Woburn, Massachusetts, were killed by a rocket attack on an airbase.

Air Force Sgt. Darrell L. Hamlin, 19, of Iowa City died on May 13, 1975, during the Mayaguez incident with the then-Khmer Rouge-led Kampuchea, or Cambodia, and the United States. Military engagement in that incident did not take place in Vietnam those killed during it, including Hamlin, are considered the last casualties of the Vietnam War and listed on the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C. [Editor’s note: this paragraph was added on Nov. 12, 2017.]

In all, **867 Iowans** were among the **58,318 Americans** either killed or missing in action in the Vietnam War. Iowa sent 115,000 to military service during the war.

Ronald Lehman said he remembers hard feelings existing toward soldiers returning from Vietnam. Lehman, of Grimes, served in the Marines from 1959 to 1965 in Vietnam, Thailand and other southeast Asian assignments. However, he said when interviewed earlier this year, “I think it has subsided.”

Stan Chisholm said he was lucky when he returned from serving during the Vietnam War. “I didn’t get a hostile reception like some folks did,” he said.



Victor, Iowa, Legion Post 54 entry in the veterans parade through the Iowa State Fairgrounds during the fair’s veterans’ day on Aug. 14, 2017. Credit: Lyle Muller/IowaWatch

Victor, Iowa, Legion Post 54 entry in the veterans parade through the Iowa State Fairgrounds during the fair’s veterans’ day on Aug. 14, 2017. Credit: Lyle Muller/IowaWatch

That has affected his thinking, Chisholm, of Ida Grove, said. “I think a lot of wounds were healed through the years. I can’t speak for everyone but I think things have changed a lot,” he said.

Chisholm carries a different reminder of the Vietnam War. He said he is fighting mantle cell lymphoma, related to exposure to Agent Orange, [the defoliant tied to diseases](#) such as leukemia, type 2 diabetes, Hodgkin disease, ischemic heart disease and others.

Chisholm said he gets good Department of Veterans Affairs service in Carroll for things that can be handled at the VA clinic there and goes to Omaha, Nebraska, for more serious health care. “I’m doing pretty well right now,” he said.

The use of Agent Orange to defoliate Vietnamese forest in a bid to rout out North Vietnamese and Viet Cong fighters affected whole families back home, Ron Healey, of Dubuque and a Vietnam War veteran, said.

“When a veteran goes to war, so does the family,” Healey said. “It’s hard to forget that if it’s your family member,” he said about Agent Orange and its after effects on contaminated U.S. soldiers.

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Iowa has [several resources](#) for veterans, including a [Home Base Iowa](#) initiative to connect volunteers with jobs, various grants, homeowners’ assistance and other [benefits](#), plus [veterans services offices](#) in all 99 counties. An [Iowa Veterans Trust Fund](#) pays for some bills vets cannot pay.

“It’s been a priority of ours for a long time,” Gov. Kim Reynolds said about veterans’ services in Iowa. “We help with education, we help with home ownership. We launched a home-based Iowa initiative that really says to our veterans that Iowa welcomes you, especially as we’re seeing a draw-down in our military.”

Nationally, Congress has passed legislation that trims hurdles veterans had faced when appealing Department of Veterans Affairs claims rejections. It is aimed at cutting wait times at VA medical centers. A Center for Investigative Reporting [report in 2012](#) showed disabled veterans in Iowa waiting more than 300 days, on average, at the VA’s Des Moines medical center.



Sen. Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa, has assailed not only updated reports on VA wait times but the way the data have been handled. Grassley [said in June](#) the VA lied about those times and that they were longer than the less-than-90 days the VA was reporting.

Small U.S. flags decorate the University of Iowa Pentacrest on Nov. 9, 2017, in observance of the Nov. 11 Veterans Day. Credit: Lyle Muller/IowaWatch

Grassley said the Iowa City VA Medical Center's wait times in mid-March ranged from 91 to 180 days for 462 veterans, 181 days to a year for 524 veterans and one to two years for 71 veterans. Wait times at the Des Moines VA medial center were more than 90 days, Grassley said, citing information from a whistleblower.

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While veterans services exist, many who served do not use them, people who work with veterans said in IowaWatch interviews.

Chris Shackelford, Korean War historian with the [Grout Museum District](#) in Waterloo recalls talking at the [Sullivan Brothers Iowa Veterans Museum](#) with Vietnam War-era veterans during a 2015-16 exhibit about the war.

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“A lot of these veterans came home and took off their uniforms, went back to work and didn't like to talk about their experiences,” Shackelford said, referring to when the veterans returned to Iowa at the end of their service. But during the exhibit some Vietnam veterans talked with Shackelford while he and Bob Neymeyer, a Grout Museum District historian, were interviewing veterans for a Voices of Iowa veterans project at the museum.

“On a few occasions, I interviewed some veterans who didn't talk to their wives about this, they didn't talk to their children about this,” Shackelford said. “And at the end of the interview they thought, maybe they had talked to us for 15 minutes. And 90 minutes later we had an excellent account of their history and service to their country.

“And it would bring tears to their eyes because it was something they've never really been able to open up with. And, here, it's an easier transformation to tell their family about it.”

Kevin Dill, Black Hawk County veterans affairs office and a Marine Corps veteran, explained it this way:

“You come home, you get a job, you raise a family. Thirty, 40 years go by and you think, ‘Hmm, I think there are benefits for me. I've never looked into them.’ And then they come in and they find out, ‘I can use a VA doctor?’ ‘Sure.’ ‘Wait a minute, I'm going to get a check tax-free from the government for the injury I had 30

years ago when I was in the service?’ ‘It’s possible.’ And it really just improves the quality of their life as they’re getting into the time of fixed income.”

County veterans affairs offices provide one-on-one, immediate services. Some get funding from their individual counties for services.

Dill said World War II and Korean War veterans are especially hesitant to ask for services as they near retirement. “A lot of veterans will come in and say, ‘Hey, everybody says I’m supposed to come see you. I really don’t want to because I don’t want to take away from somebody who needs it.’ You’re really not.”

Dill said veterans advocates want to keep telling Congress about veterans who need services to which he says they are entitled. “If nobody comes in, well, then there’s no need to allocate funding and they (Congress) move the funding somewhere else,” he said.

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