

***Column: March 29 is Vietnam War Veterans Day***

*If you know someone who served in the Vietnam War, be sure to tell them you appreciate their commitment to our country.*



Sue Sterling interviews Ole, a Vietnam veteran, during a March 22, 2024, event for Vietnam veterans at the Brainerd VFW.

Photo by Mark Persons



**Opinion by [Sue Sterling](#)**

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BRAINERD — Imagine you're a young man just getting out of high school when you receive a letter from the U.S. Selective Service stating you are to report to your local draft board to evaluate your draft status.

Between 1964 and 1973 that usually meant you were going to be shipped to Vietnam to fight in a conflict that had not even been declared a war by Congress.

By 1969, more than 500,000 U.S. military personnel were stationed in Vietnam. The U.S. military conscripted (drafted) approximately 1.9 million service personnel into their ranks over the course of the Vietnam War. By 1967, growing numbers of Americans were becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the [war](#). In 1982, the [Vietnam Veterans Memorial](#) was dedicated in Washington, D.C., inscribed with the names of 57,939 members of U.S. armed forces who died or were missing as a result of the war. Over the following years, additions to the list brought the total past 58,200.

Many of our young men felt it was their duty to go to Vietnam to protect the freedom of America. When they left, they held their heads high and were proud to serve their country. When they returned, the country was in conflict about that "conflict," and treated some of the returning soldiers with contempt. That was not a proud moment in U.S. history.

In 2017, U.S. Congress declared March 29 as National Vietnam War Veterans Day, as that is the official day the U.S. troops were pulled out of Vietnam. Somewhere between 1975 and 2017, it was identified as a war, not a conflict.

Many veterans from that war never talked about their time "in-country." Some were made to feel guilty about killing people over there. Others had just seen too much violence and experienced too much pain to ever want to discuss it. But with the declaration of a day set aside for their service, some of them are now willing to come together to talk about their experiences in that war. That's exactly what happened on March 22 at the Brainerd VFW.

Brainerd VFW Post 1647 hosted an evening of free food and drinks for Vietnam veterans and their significant others (most often called spouses) on March 22, to respect Good Friday, which falls on March 29 this year. There were 50-plus veterans who came, and the air was palpable with excitement and nostalgia as old friends mingled and reminisced throughout the evening.

As a writer and an active member of the Brainerd VFW Auxiliary, I sat down with some of the veterans and asked them questions about their experiences and how it affected their lives — two Army, one Air

Force, and one Marine. I even got to talk to one of the wives to get her perspective on how it affected her husband.

- Would they enlist again if they were asked to go to the same war? All four said yes.
- What would they tell a young person heading to war now? "Keep your head down and don't volunteer," was the agreed-upon advice.
- How did your experience in Vietnam affect who you are now? It helped them focus on who they were, and it was a good general education in life. It also helped them attain an education with the benefits they received from the GI Bill.
- Were they receiving good service from the Veterans Administration? Yes, they are being well-served by the Crow Wing County Veterans Service Office, as well as the VA hospital. No complaints at all from these four Brainerd area vets.

The story told to me by one veteran's wife reflected a different perspective on how the war affected him. They were only dating when Ole left for Vietnam (Yes, Ole; and her name was Victoria, not Lena!). She was attending Mankato State College and living in a women's dorm. Her dorm sisters were aghast that she was writing to a soldier in Vietnam, as there was great stigma about anyone and anything associated with the Vietnam War at that time.

He wrote to her, too, but never said much about what was happening over there. She saved his letters. When he returned home to St. Paul, he felt the same stigma she experienced. Even the nurse at the hospital who treated him for his fever avoided him after she learned he fought in Vietnam. To this day he never talks about it. Victoria said this yearly Vietnam veteran recognition event at the VFW is the only time he ever discusses the topic.

The Brainerd VFW and its Auxiliary are here to help veterans, active military personnel and their families in any way they can. They take the VFW motto seriously, "No one does more for veterans." Hosting this event for the Vietnam War veterans is just one of the many ways they help.

A special thank you goes to the Daughters of the American Revolution for providing and serving apple pie and ice cream to all who came. Add to that the sloppy Joes and chips that were served, it was a very successful night.

March 29 is the National Vietnam War Veterans Day. When our boys came home from their tour of duty, they didn't get any recognition from our government. If you know someone who served in that war, be sure to tell them you appreciate their commitment to our country. After all, there were a lot of service members who didn't come home to apple pie, ice cream, and sloppy Joes!



Brainerd VFW Post 1647 hosted an evening of free food and drinks for Vietnam veterans and their significant others on March 22 at the Brainerd VFW. Photo by Mark Persons