

BRANDYWINE

FAST

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SERVING BRANDYWINE HUNDRED



County to add 20 officers to police force

By Jesse Chadderdon
Staff Reporter

New Castle County officials announced plans Tuesday to put 20 new police officers on the streets.

The announcement comes just weeks after several council members called for an emergency meeting with administration officials regarding police staffing levels. Twenty-one of the department's 341 authorized front-line positions are currently unfilled, largely because of budget constraints.

But now Jeffrey Bullock, the county's chief administration officer, says the county is willing to authorize an additional \$1.7 million to bring on the new officers. He said the administration's financial team is looking at places throughout this year's budget from where funding can be moved to public safety.

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Supply shortages prompt plea from Food Bank

By Andrea Miller
Staff Reporter

An increase in food requests from soup kitchens and food pantries during the holiday season is nothing new for the Food Bank of Delaware. But this year, with inventory lower than usual, the organization is con-

Community asked to help needy

cerned and calling on the community to help.

The Food Bank of Delaware distributes more than 10 million pounds of food to more than 90,000 low-income Delawareans each year through more than 350 partner churches,

community centers, schools, hospices, shelters, and soup kitchens statewide.

The non-profit organization, serving needy Delawareans for 26 years, fills its storehouse of canned goods, prepackaged foods and perishable groceries from multiple

PLUMBERS BUSY ON TURKEY DAY

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sources: community donations, surplus stock from grocery retailers

See **FOOD BANK**, page 3

Celebrating Veterans



Charlie and Leonard and Bob and Larry and Jim

IN SOLDIERS' WORDS



Bradywine High School graduate **Bob Coen** holds up a Delaware flag on a base in Vietnam, where he served for 19 months. His correspondence with former reporter Nancy Lynch, along with letters by Brandwine resident Phil Wnkler, are included in her new project, "Vietnam Mailbag: Voices from the War."

SEE COEN'S
STORY PAGE 17

SEE WINKLER'S
STORY PAGE 17

Delaware author revives voices from Vietnam

From the early 1960s through 1973, hundreds of thousands of American men and women served in Vietnam in an undeclared and highly controversial war. During its height, Nancy Lynch, then a young reporter, corresponded with Delaware soldiers stationed in the war zone for a local newspaper column that aimed bring hope and a human face to the war.

Today, to honor those who served, Lynch is writing a book entitled Vietnam Mailbag: Voices from the War, 1968-1972, featuring the original letters as well as contemporary interviews with soldiers who wrote her decades ago.

By Andrea Miller
Staff Reporter

When she opened the old cardboard computer box and began sifting through 900 letters from Vietnam for a book she was finally ready to write after nearly four decades, the magnitude of the treasure she had begun to dawn on Nancy Lynch.

It was a priceless time capsule and it was saying, "write me and write me now," Lynch recalls.

The collection contained the views, hopes, fears and observations of hundreds of Delaware soldiers who corresponded with Lynch from the Vietnam war zone for a column she wrote for the Wilmington Morning News (now The News Journal) during the height of the war, from 1968 to 1972.

The column wasn't quite an editorial, it wasn't quite a feature, and it wasn't anything any other newspaper seemed to be doing at the time.

As the column grew from once a week to three times a week, Lynch's editors let her shape it the way she wanted to. The young reporter, just 21 when the project began, decided

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Celebrating Veterans

LYNCH – from page 1

to make it a real exchange, a correspondence, responding to every note, asking questions and encouraging

the soldiers to tell it like it was, printing what seemed most human, and quietly passing along requests for

Delaware flags or more copies of the paper so each could be filled by other staff members to encourage

those writing.

“There was no roadmap for this,” Lynch, now 61, recalls, “and it turned out to be far more personal than the dry war reports that appeared on the 6 p.m. news.”

Today, experts say the letters may be the largest in tact primary source for a social history of the era, but even back then, she knew she had something special. The experience – to be a part of something that helped ease the pain of soldiers and family back home as the nation was torn apart by conflict over the controversial war – had been deeply gratifying.

Someday, she hoped to write about it.

Lynch worked for the paper another five years after the war and project ended, and eventually left to become a freelance writer and raise a family with her husband Lawrence B. Steele III in rural Bethel.

By the mid 1980s, the country was finally giving the Vietnam veterans a thanks for their service. But for Lynch, immersed in parenting two young boys, there was little time for writing books. She gathered the letters from drawers, nooks and filing cabinets into a Radio Shack cardboard box and relegated them to the loft of a falling down old barn behind her 1850s farm house for safe keeping.

There the box sat for more than 20 years, until 2006, sons grown and a name as a freelance writer well established, Lynch went looking for it. She



Nancy Lynch

found a mouse nested among the letters, but amazingly, nearly all, still in their original envelopes, were in tact, along with the columns she had written and carefully clipped from the paper.

She hadn't reread a single one since the column ended. Now, sifting through them, tracking down the veterans again, reconnecting with them and starting to write, she discovered a deep feeling that this is what she was always meant to do.

“All the years of writing, it's all been preparation for this book,” she says.

Lynch envisions the book as a thanks to the men and women who risked their lives for their country and often came home to scorn rather than honor.

For the book, Lynch plans to include the full text of many of the original letters, augmented by photographs, memorabilia, and contemporary interviews with veterans. She hopes to feature two from each of the five years the column ran.

So far, she has completed three, and it's been a wonderful reunion, she says. A few have made a vocation of

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educating this generation about the Vietnam War. But for others, the interviews have taken them on an emotional journey to a place they have not talked about in a very long time. The veterans' interests and views run the gamut, just as the letters did back then, she says, but their support for the book has been unanimously supportive.

Vietnam Mailbag: Voices from the War, 1968-1972 is scheduled for a Memorial Day 2008 release by Portfolio Books.

Lynch has co-authored six Delaware-themed coffee table books with award-winning photographer Kevin Fleming, who owns Portfolio Books. Fleming is the Mailbag project's photo editor, and its senior editor is Larry Nagengast, a former editor and reporter who served in the Navy during the Vietnam era.

Autographed copies of Vietnam Mailbag may be ordered at a special pre-publication price of \$35 (shipping included). Send a check or money order to Vietnam Mailbag, P.O. Box 68, Bethel, DE 19931, or visit www.vietnammailbag.com for more information.

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Celebrating Veterans

Letter brings back memories of Vietnam's impact on veteran

By Andrea Miller
Staff Reporter

Dog tags, the yellow stripes of an Army Sgt. 1st Class, an assortment of Vietnam service ribbons and patches fill a velvet-lined shadow box that hangs on the wall of Phil Winkler's office.

It hangs beside an oversized 1980s aerial photograph of the Pentagon, margins spilling over with signatures and retirement well wishes.

In his hand is a copy of a letter he wrote from the mobile petroleum laboratory on the Vung Tau peninsula, near the China Sea, where he was stationed during the Vietnam war. It's a letter he hasn't seen in 37 years.

The Brandywine Hundred man is momentarily speechless, until, shaking his head slowly, his free hand brushing across his face to hide a wry smile as it creeps into his mouth and eyes, he says, "Yup. That's it. That's how it was."

The letter, dated November, 1970, was one of more than 900 written by Delaware soldiers who corresponded from the war zone with reporter Nancy Lynch for a local newspaper column that aimed to put a human face on the controversial war during the height of America's involvement.

Last year, Lynch retrieved the collection of letters from storage and started looking for their authors to interview for her new book, *Vietnam Mailbag: Voices of the War, 1968-1972*. She



Phil Winkler saved pictures from bases and nearby cities while on tour in Vietnam.

envisions it as a way to honor the soldiers who served, often without thanks, in a controversial war two generations ago.

Winkler grew up in a small town on Maryland's eastern shore, graduating from high school in 1964.

He was drafted in 1967 and left for Vietnam in 1970, in the wake of Woodstock, war protests, and the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr.

He rarely talks about that time, except with a close friend or relative when they ask, or when he sees another vet. But it's always there. Nothing has had more of an effect on his life.

"It amazes me sometimes, how close it is," he says.

As Winkler reads his own words: that the military "was doing the country a grave injustice by its presence in Vietnam," and how "with God's will, this farce here and this terrible waste of U.S. money will soon be over," he can't help but make comparisons to what's

going on in Iraq today.

Does he think his letters, to be revived in Lynch's book, will have an impact on the current debate about the war in Iraq?

No. The horror of war has been told too many times for that. Those letters were, and will remain, just the thoughts of a GI who needed to speak, he says. And maybe, reading them years later will be cathartic for others who lived through the era.

Reminiscing about Vietnam for a story about the forthcoming book, Winkler produces some old black and white photographs of himself, the compound, a nearby town. He muses about how it hardly occurred to you that you were frightened all the time. He laughs about sleeping in the lab where it was air conditioned to keep the delicate petroleum measurement instruments in working order. He describes the lush scenery of the countryside.

But without warning, his voice catches in his throat, as his tales mean-

der toward a story about going home.

"That moment never leaves you," he says.

A long pause.

"Never. You never forget," he begins, trying to explain the feeling to someone who has never experienced war — how GIs, casually talking as they loaded the plane bound for American soil, fell to a palpable, collective silence as the plane lifted off the ground. How all held their breath as the aircraft climbed through enemy skies. The communal exhale when it finally leveled off at 5,000 feet, out of the enemy's range.

"Then, after hours in the sky, the captain," Winkler says, and he breaks off into silence again.

After a long pause, "He said," Winkler tries to begin again.

Unable to continue, Winkler swallows hard. More silence, and now tears.

He takes a breath and continues, "The captain said, I can see the coast of California. And we all held our breath again until we were safely on the ground."

There was no one on the ground to greet the GI's that morning, but he wasn't aware of how bad that felt until the 1980s, when he watched a belated welcome home parade on television, as the country was finally rethinking its response to the soldiers who had served in a war so many had opposed.

Did America learn a lesson that has changed their treatment of soldiers

VOICES OF WAR

Vietnam Mailbag: *Voices from the War, 1968-1972* by Nancy Lynch is scheduled for a Memorial Day 2008 release by Portfolio Books.

The book will contain the full text of letters from hundreds of Delaware soldiers who wrote to Lynch from the combat zone for a local newspaper column, as well as contemporary interviews with the veterans.

Veterans interested in participating in the project should contact lynch through www.vietnammailbag.com.

Lynch plans to donate a portion of the book's proceeds to an organization that provides services to Delaware Vietnam veterans.

coming home from Iraq?

Winkler doubts it, saying a nation can't really separate soldiers from criticism of the war they are fighting.

Back then, "the Army and Marines were demoralized from the long ground war. The Army was broken and morale sucked. When we came home, we had veterans protesting cuts in medical military benefits, and here we are, doing the same goddamn thing now. The military is being destroyed, morale sucks, and Americans have lost their honor around the world all over again."

Yet, despite his opposition to Vietnam, Winkler stayed in after the war ended. He never set out for an Army career, but he found it was easy to succeed and the work as a laboratory manager was interesting.

He completed a 20-year military career at the Pentagon in 1987, and today, Winkler heads a consulting firm that manages data on hazardous and infectious waste for hospitals and industries.

The Pentagon picture beside his war medals on the wall of row house office in downtown Wilmington, are like book-ends to that era in his life.

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Brandywine veteran reflects, says he's grateful

By Andrea Miller
Staff Reporter

In 1972, Bob Coen returned home to Brandywine Hundred feeling lucky to have escaped injury after serving 19 months in Vietnam.

Three decades later, he would become a war amputee. In early 2005, Veteran's Administration Hospital doctors discovered that exposure to the defoliation chemical "Agent Orange" had been slowly, eating away the bones in his left leg.

Today, the 1968 Brandywine High School graduate lives in the basement of his elderly mother's home. He walks with a cane and prosthesis just below his left knee.

As a veteran, he feels lucky.

"I came home alive, and I made it through my time over there without a lot of (emotional) problems like

so many guys who couldn't cope with what they saw," he says. "Sure, I'd still hit the ground when I heard a car backfire. We all did for years. But I could take up life again and put the war behind me."

After he came home, Coen, 57, was married for a while, and has a daughter who lives in another state. Until the amputation, he held a job as a hotel manager.

Sure, it was a shame to lose the leg, he says, but he says he can't complain... nothing could have prevented it, and the VA staff have taken good care of him. Worse than the amputation, he says, were four months of rehabilitation in the VA that followed.

"There were guys in there that were still living that war. They didn't know what's going on, they didn't know where they were, they just kept telling war stories over

and over. It was hard to be around them."

Coen was drafted by the Marines in 1969. Fulfilling his one-year military obligation as a Marine sounded especially dangerous, so he decided to sign up for three years with the Army and was assigned to the postal service. It seemed a safer bet.

Being a mailman was not a front line job, but it had its own moments of terror: his duties included jumping out of a helicopter under enemy fire to get to soldiers who needed to send money home but couldn't get back to a base to do so. Incoming bombs, monsoons, infections and shrapnel wounds were part of life, even for a mailman.

Looking back, the toughest decision he ever made — harder than choosing amputation over letting the bones in his leg crumble under normal use — was opting for a second tour in Vietnam, in

order to get out of his Army commitment a year early.

Reflecting back, Coen says it was a senseless war, but he's at peace about it on a personal level.

Coen was one of hundreds of Delaware soldiers who corresponded with reporter Nancy Lynch between 1968 and 1972, for the "Vietnam Mailbag," a local newspaper column that aimed to put a human face on the controversial war.

Last year, Lynch began reconnecting with the men and women who had written to her, for a book she is writing based on the correspondence.

Vietnam Mailbag: Voices from the War, 1968-1972, will contain the full text of many of the original 900 letters, as well as contemporary interviews with veterans who wrote her as they served in the war zone. A Memorial Day, 2008 release is planned for the book.

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