

# 'Mailbag' lets readers into lives of Vietnam servicemen

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By Sarika Jagtiani, Staff Writer  
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Dover, Del. - From 1968 to 1972, readers glimpsed the lives of Delaware servicemen and women in Vietnam through Nancy E. Lynch's "Vietnam Mailbag" column in The News Journal.

The letters told the stories of those who were drafted into service and those who went willingly.

Soldiers, airmen, sailors and Marines told stories about working with Vietnamese children, and of the mundane aspects of life at war, and of their frustrations, and of their pride.

The letters are now part of a book by Lynch, "Vietnam Mailbag, Voices From the War: 1968 - 1972" and an exhibit by the same name.

The simultaneous book release and exhibit opening will take place from 1:30 to 3:30 p.m. Tuesday, Nov. 11, Veterans Day, at the Delaware Public Archives.

The popularity of the column was a revelation when it started, Lynch said.

"We had no idea whether or not we would be getting mail, and certainly not the quantity," she said. "I was totally overwhelmed within the first two weeks. We knew we had a good thing going, and most importantly we had struck a chord with our servicemen in Vietnam."

In going back to interview 12 of the veterans who wrote letters, Lynch was surprised to find they were more or less the same people they were nearly 40 years ago. They were honest, straightforward, she said.

A common thread among all of them, and one that the column didn't cover but the book does, is the way they were treated upon returning.

Some of the guys would take their uniforms off, changing in restrooms to avoid ridicule, but the short hair always gave them away, Lynch said.

People took out their anger on the warriors, not the war.

The veterans told Lynch they are happy servicemen today see yellow ribbons and parades upon return.

These are snippets of what is contained in the 460-page book. Lynch described the book as a belated thank you to the servicemen.

“My fundamental belief is that it’s never too late to say thank you,” she said. “This book really is my thank you to the Delaware servicemen.”

The Delaware Public Archives is thanking Lynch these days for donating the letters to the archives.

“These letters, I see as gifts to the people of Delaware,” she said. “The archives is centrally located and the letters will be maintained there as they should be.”

Tom Summers, archives manager of outreach services, said the letters prompted the exhibit.

“Those are the most valuable documents you have, the personal ones,” he said. They give viewers a better idea of what was going through the minds of servicemen, or “the ones who actually had their boots on the ground over there.”

“These guys wrote about everything from the war itself to the weather. They’re real guys, with real families,” added Jessica Carmichael, archives’ graphic artist, who helped design the exhibit.

Some of the letters will be up for people to see during the exhibit, and all of them – nearly 900 – will be at the Archives following it.

The exhibit also features artifacts on loan from the state’s veterans, such as boots, helmets, postcards and more.

The “Vietnam Mailbag” reception is open to the public and free.

Sen. Tom Carper, a former Navy flight officer who served in Southeast Asia, wrote the book’s foreword. He will make brief comments, as will author Lynch.

Joining her will be some of the veterans whose stories are detailed in the book. Archives Director C. Russell McCabe will accept the ceremonial presentation of letters, documents and photographs to the people of Delaware.

Refreshments will be served, and books will be available.

No reservations are necessary.

The exhibit will run through the end of May.

The Delaware Public Archives is open from 9 a.m. to 4:15 p.m. Monday through Saturday, with the exhibit galleries staying open until 4:45 p.m. Saturdays. It is closed Sundays.

**If you go...**

**What:** “Vietnam Mailbag, Voices From the War: 1968 – 1972” reception

**When:** 1:30 to 3:30 p.m. Tuesday, Nov. 11, Veterans Day

**Where:** Delaware Public Archives, 121 Duke of York St., Dover

**Admission:** Free

**Information:** Call 744-5047, visit [www.archives.delaware.gov](http://www.archives.delaware.gov) or visit [www.vietnammailbag.com](http://www.vietnammailbag.com)