

Veteran reflects on Vietnam, still grateful today

**By Andrea Miller
Staff Reporter**

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

Three decades later, he would become a belated war amputee, when in early 2005, Veteran's Administration Hospital doctors discovered that exposure to the now infamous defoliation chemical "Agent Orange" had been slowly, silently, 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. The 57 year old Brandywine Hundred man 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 was married for a while, and has a daughter who lives out of 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 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, and landed a position in the Army’s postal service instead. 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.