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Echoes of a distant war

Delaware soldiers' words live on in Nancy E. Lynch's book 'Vietnam Mailbag'

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As the war in Vietnam mangled the bodies and minds of a generation, Nancy E. Lynch, a young, single journalist at the newspaper that would become The News Journal, grew accustomed to finding in her mailbox red-white-and-blue-trimmed, military-issued envelopes.

She eagerly awaited the letters, whose accounts she relayed to readers of her column, "Nancy's Vietnam Mailbag." Some were tinged with caked mud, a stowaway from the trenches of Vietnam to the mailbox of a reporter in Delaware. Soldiers sometimes apologized for the condition of such letters.

"Here were guys fighting a war, 12,000 miles from home," says Lynch, "and yet they would take five minutes or 10 minutes, or sometimes 20 minutes -- I'd get these huge, long letters -- but they did this because they wanted those of us at home to know what was going on. And they had their public forum. The column was their forum."

The soldiers' good spirits, Lynch says, struck her.

"It was almost like they were trying to make *us* feel good."

Many of the more than 900 letters she received -- she says she replied to every one of them -- are excerpted in the book that Lynch is releasing today. Some appear in full.

"Vietnam Mailbag: Voices From the War, 1968-1972" is a collection of deeply personal portraits of Delawareans who lived the war, but it also is an encyclopedic account of how Vietnam impacted the state.

It includes a glossary, a list of Delawareans killed in action and an index of 1,300 names that appeared in Lynch's columns from 1968-72. At 456 pages, it has the heft of a telephone book. Some pages are filled entirely by photographs. The designer, Jaime L. Anderson of Rehoboth Beach, adorned spaces not occupied by text with artifacts.

Military patches are cropped, seemingly having been pressed between pages. Aged photographs, slightly askew, appear taped to the surface. Other floating images include a mock playing card that directed American propaganda toward Vietcong sympathizers, and a smaller card intended to lure those same souls to the North Vietnamese side.

Most of the photographs taken during the war were provided by Douglas R. Elliott, a combat photographer; Kenneth D. Warner of Middletown, who piloted helicopter ambulances; Richard S. Lovekin of Wilmington, who disregarded the exemption delivered by a punctured right kidney and enlisted anyway; and William W. Hutchison Jr., an infantryman and later a reporter and photographer.

"As a history teacher, I see this as an outstanding primary source," Hutchison says. "It's very important

in that it provides the actual words of the people. Vietnam was a war that is still not truly understood by the public. ... I think it's very important to preserve this, to present it to a generation that was not there, and of course for the families of the people who wrote the letters, many of whom are not around anymore."

Hutchison, a retired history teacher of 35 years, now is a volunteer crewmember of the tall ship Kalmar Nyckel. During his teaching days, he would arrive at school on Veterans Day dressed in his military uniform. He'd show students slides of the photographs he took while in Vietnam.

The students, he says, liked seeing photos of Hutchison as a young man with a short military haircut. They were rapt by his stories of daily life, such as how he'd light cigarettes and touch them to leeches that had piggybacked on his body.

"I wanted to show them the much bigger picture that war is not a glorious enterprise," he says, "that it is very gruesome and for the most part an indescribable experience."

The book to which he contributed his letters, thoughts and about a third of his photographs aims to approach that impossible task.

"It was probably the seminal experience of my life," Hutchison says of Vietnam. "I can remember more day-to-day of what happened there than I can any other year of my life."

The Delaware Public Archives in Dover eventually will store and digitize all of the letters, which after Memorial Day will move to the Rehoboth Beach Museum and then to the Delaware Historical Society.

Lynch self-published "Vietnam Mailbag" and set the price at \$40. ("I wanted to make the book affordable," she says.) It will be available at www.vietnammailbag.com and at several local bookstores. Among them are the Ninth Street Book Shop in Wilmington, the Borders in Stanton and on Concord Pike, and Browseabout Books in Rehoboth Beach. Lynch also is talking with representatives of Barnes & Noble.

The project gained traction in January 2007, when she met Larry Nagengast and Kevin Fleming at the Delaware Public Archives. Nagengast would serve as the project's editor, Fleming as its photographer for contemporary images.

They had figured they could finish the book in time for a Memorial Day 2008 release.

They were wrong.

As Lynch interviewed veterans, more photographs and artifacts poured in.

"It surprised us," she says. "Nobody knew the scope of this project."

So they shifted the release date to today, Veterans Day.

The book features extended portraits of 12 soldiers who most frequently sent her letters. Lynch reconnected with them and asked how Vietnam shaped their lives. She also asked for their thoughts about the war in Iraq.

Long before the project came to fruition, Lynch thought about its possibility.

After the column was put to bed,, she asked her editors if the newspaper wanted to keep the letters. They told her there wasn't enough room. So Lynch brought the materials home, and before long she moved them into the barn on her 80-acre property in western Sussex County.

She forgot about them until about two years ago. She was preparing for a two-week vacation when she spotted the large box in which the letters had slumbered without climate control. The materials

were in decent shape.

Lynch spent two weeks, night and day, sorting the letters by year and month. She did the same with her columns.

She just had to do something with this, she thought. She felt an obligation. "The time was right now," Lynch says. "And it's never too late to say 'thank you.' "

In her final installment of Vietnam Mailbag, she closed with a hopeful thought: "Perhaps we'll convert some of your reminiscences into a book some day."
