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The timeless gift of our war heroes' letters

The Vietnam War is often called the forgotten war and its veterans unhailed heroes. No single effort does more to undo that slight than Nancy Lynch's "Vietnam Mailbag," which brings Delaware's contribution to that conflict vividly to the forefront. No more fitting tribute can be made in tomorrow's Veterans Day remembrance honoring those who served in all our wars than these "voices from the war."

Nancy was a new reporter on this paper, a recent graduate of the University of Delaware, when Fred Hartmann and other editors, including myself, decided we needed a further contact with the servicemen. The News Journal was already sending free subscriptions to more than 800 troops. After Lynch contacted them, letters and photos started pouring in.

The News Journal's commitment to keeping in touch with those troops also included sending writer Bill Frank and photographer Bill Snead to Vietnam to find and interview Delawareans. Troops received free Delaware flags from the state Development Office.

From May 1968 to the end of 1972, "Vietnam Mailbag" kept the troops thousands of miles away in touch with Delawareans. Amazingly, Lynch preserved almost 900 letters in the barn of her home in Sussex County's Bethel. So nearly 35 years after her last column hinted at a possible book, and with two years of work including the editing assistance of Larry Nagengast, Nancy Lynch has completed these 450-plus pages that are much more than a mere compilation of letters. With additional text and photos, this hardback book is a portrait of the times in Vietnam, Delaware and the United States. As Lynch says in a foreword:

"Though their letters were directed to Delaware, we soon realized their words resonated far beyond the boundaries of the nation's second smallest state. Delawareans indeed spoke for all Americans through their letters, and, in the process, gave those of us at home an unprecedented window on the war ... We celebrate these exemplary war letters and safeguard them today as touchstones of time."

The letters are filled with humor and sadness, reality and imagination, hardship and complaints. They not only depict life on the battlefield but also vividly express the feelings of troops concerned with what is happening at home, such as protests against the war and the military occupation of Wilmington after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968.

The writers show both support for and dismay at the dispatch of troops to Southeast Asia. Often arranged by topic, the letters include, for example, a series of Valentine's Day sentiments. We see Americans interacting with the Vietnamese, with a letter asking for soap, crayons, toothbrushes, candy and other items for the children. The book also has Lynch's recent interviews with a dozen Vietnam veterans about their war experiences and their subsequent life in Delaware on their return.

No illustration is more poignant than a letter sent by a private first class that arrived with a notification that he had been killed in battle. The book lists 166 men with Delaware connections who died in the war, or are still considered missing or prisoners, and who are memorialized at the Vietnam Memorial at 18th Street and Baynard Boulevard in Wilmington. Their names are among the 58,258 on the Vietnam Memorial Wall in Washington.

This is indeed a "timeless, breathtaking tribute and a gift to us all," which is the reaction of Andrew Carroll, founder of the Legacy Project to preserve servicemen's letters, and editor of books with those letters

"Vietnam Mailbag" is an important and outstanding addition to that endeavor. The original "Vietnam Mailbag" letters will become part of the Public Archives in Dover, where this book will be formally unveiled in Veterans Day ceremonies tomorrow afternoon at 1:30.
