

Today's war brings yesterday's war to the fore for Vietnam vet

**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, 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 where he was stationed in Vietnam -- a letter he hasn't seen in 37 years.

He 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 unearthed the collection of letters and began looking for their authors to interview for her new book, Vietnam Mailbag: Voices of the War, 1968-1972. She 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 hope his letters, 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 so 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 Lynch's forthcoming book, Winkler produces some old black and white photos 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, and describes the lush scenery of the countryside.

But without warning, his voice catches in his throat, as his tales meander 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.

“Then, after hours in the sky, the captain,” Winkler says, breaking off again.

“He said,” Winkler swallows. More silence, and now tears.

“He 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 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 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 the war, Winkler stayed in after Vietnam. 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. And the Pentagon picture beside his war medals on the wall of row house office in downtown Wilmington, are like bookends to that era in his life.