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Project aims to preserve memories of Vietnam war

Dennis E. Powell Jan 20, 2016



Vietnam veterans, from left, Charles Turner, Chuck Douglas and Jerry Sullivan, listen and attentively to the discussion about Athens in Vietnam: Oral History Project, Tuesday night at the Athens Public Library.

The Vietnam war scarred the nation, and nowhere in the country was the effect greater than in southeastern Ohio, a group of Vietnam veterans and other interested persons was told Tuesday night.

Introducing the “Athens in Vietnam: Oral History Project,” Cyrus Moore, museum associate and curator of Military Collections at the Athens County Historical Society and Museum noted that a disproportionate number of young people from Appalachia served in the war. And of course antiwar demonstrations at Ohio University led to the city being patrolled by the National Guard and the early end of the school year in 1970.

The group, assembled at the Athens Public Library, was told by Moore of what historians call “the Sgt. York syndrome” – the phenomenon in which relatively poor middle Americans are quick to rise to patriotic defense of the country in time of war, exemplified by World War I hero Sgt. Alvin York. Such persons are more accustomed to the dangers of life, are used to roughing it in the woods, and tend to be more adventurous, he said, and are likely to be more proficient in the use of firearms.

“People who grow up in cities don’t have those skills,” he said. “But Vietnam was not like anything Appalachian soldiers had seen.”

Moore said the project will collect the stories of Athens County Vietnam veterans – material on the protesters has already been collected – as part of a series of oral histories that he hopes will come to include The Ridges and the Korean War.

Soldiers’ experience of the Vietnam and the controversy surrounding it was different from that of those who had served in other wars. “Once they returned home they were met with a sometimes hostile populace,” he said. In addition, returning warriors were typically flown home, rather than being repatriated by ship. This meant that the time between the battlefield and their hometown was sometimes only a day or two. Their reactions varied and “went from helping other vets to antiwar protests.”

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While the statistics are known, Moore said, the Athens Vietnam Oral History project “is seeking to fill in the gaps.”

BUT DID THE COUNTRY LEARN from the mistakes of Vietnam?

Not necessarily, said Ingo Tauschweizer, a military historian at OU. Vietnam involved fighting an insurgency, but when hostilities erupted in the Middle East, he said, the military needed to learn all over again. “And the lessons from Vietnam were only 30 years old at that point,” he added.

The Vietnam war, Tauschweizer said, was one in which “the U.S. didn’t figure out how to win the war, as opposed to winning the battles.” The U.S. lost the war, he said, with the December 1972 bombing campaign essentially serving only to “get North Vietnam to accept our concessions.”

The wounds, both among individuals and in the nation overall, remained following the U.S. withdrawal, he noted. President Jimmy Carter pardoned draft resisters and hoped to rally the country to those who had served, in a 1978 speech. “He tried to square the circle,” said Tauschweizer. “It is not impossible to embrace the warrior but not the war, but it is a difficult exercise.”

The Vietnam war was in some ways an outlier in the history of American military projection in the Cold War years, he said. “South Korea certainly benefited from the American presence. West Germany definitely benefited from the American presence. South Vietnam did not.”

One legacy of the war, he said, is that the end of military conscription in January 1973 actually made the country more willing to undertake overseas military operations.

“‘We might go’ is easier to sell to the public when there is no draft,” he said.

Vietnam veterans present expressed varying degrees of enthusiasm for the oral history project, which is sponsored in part by the Ohio Humanities, a state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

“It’s a good thing,” said Jerry Sullivan of Buchtel, “I’m looking forward to participating in it.” Sullivan served in the U.S. Army combat infantry in Vietnam in 1968 and ’69 until he was wounded.

His view is echoed by Athenian Chuck Douglas, who was “in country” with the 18th Engineers in 1966 and ’67. “I think it’s a great idea,” he said, noting that he believes that a contributing factor to so many from Appalachia enlisting in Vietnam and other wars is “the strong Celtic and Scottish heritage of a lot of the families here.”

Charles Turner of Albany, who served in the Signal Corps in 1967 and ’67, “when the Tet offensive was going on,” is less eager to share his war story.

“Some guys just don’t want to talk about it,” he said.