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Vietnam vets commemorate Chicago's 1986 'Welcome Home' parade in new book

By Jeff Banowitz

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Spontaneous embraces were the order of the day during the Welcome Home parade for Vietnam Veterans on June 13, 1986, perhaps the largest in the country for Vietnam veterans. (Charles Cherney/Chicago Tribune)

Vietnam War veterans Roger McGill and Harold Beyne both wore caps commemorating their service in the U.S. Army more than five decades earlier as they sipped coffee in a Dunkin' doughnut shop in Niles. The restaurant has become a regular meeting place for the Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter 242, a group of more than 100 Chicago-area vets who gather to find support, camaraderie and friendship through a connection to a war that deeply divided the country.

"It wasn't easy coming back, for a lot of reasons," said Beyne, 74, who served in the Army's 101st Airborne Division. Born and raised in the Chicago area, he now lives in Northbrook with his wife, Sarah. "There was so much being said that those of us who went there knew wasn't true."

He recalled the disrespect of people in uniform and political disagreements that made it next to impossible to provide support for returning vets.

That's the part of the story that most people know.



Vietnam veterans march along Grand Avenue at Michigan Avenue during their Welcome Home parade on June 13, 1986, in Chicago. (Chuck Berman/Chicago Tribune) scanned from print, published on June 16, 1986 (Chuck Berman/Chicago Tribune)

But Beyne and McGill also want to remember an event — more than 10 years after the fall of Saigon in 1975 — that proved instrumental in the lives of many returning Chicago-area veterans. The Vietnam Veterans Welcome Home Parade, held June 13, 1986, was one of the largest gatherings in the city’s history, attracting more than 175,000 veterans and an estimated 500,000 spectators to belatedly thank and celebrate those who served in Vietnam.

[[Vintage Chicago Tribune: Vietnam Veterans Welcome Home Parade of 1986](#)]

McGill and Beyne, who were both involved in organizing the event, have written a short book about its creation, execution and impact on the lives of veterans. “The Day We Finally Came Back from Vietnam: The Untold Story of Chicago’s WELCOME HOME Veterans Parade,” was published this spring and offers a look behind the scenes at how the event came together.

“Nobody had any idea what to expect,” said McGill, 80, who served in the 25th Infantry Division in Vietnam. He grew up in Chicago, just blocks from where he lives now his wife, Kathy. “We just knew it was important to finally welcome people home.”



In 1985, McGill had traveled to the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C. — the Wall had opened three years earlier — to pay his respects to the 22 people he served with who were killed in action. There he learned about an upcoming event in New York City, a parade to honor Vietnam veterans for the first time. He decided to attend it as well and marched with 25,000 others over the Brooklyn Bridge and into the financial district, where they were showered with ticker tape and confetti.

“These were very meaningful events to me,” McGill said. “I felt that I had finally returned from Vietnam.”

McGill had attended the parade with Tom Stack, who served in the U.S. Army, 9th Infantry Division, earning two Silver Star medals and three Bronze Star medals for valor. A former Chicago policeman who taught criminal justice at Richard J. Daley College, Stack had the idea to bring the parade to Chicago, and he invited McGill to help with the organizing.

“We called Mayor Harold Washington, who was a veteran (in World War II), and he was incredibly supportive,” McGill said. “He told us to do it. So we were like, now what do we do?”

They quickly recruited other veterans, including Beyne, to help with fundraising, logistics and planning, working with numerous city departments, local businesses and other veteran organizations.

“We at least had the example of New York, so our goal was to get at least 25,000 marchers,” McGill said. “But we didn’t understand how strong the interest would be. We didn’t expect the number of people who would come.”

They had an inkling the morning of the parade, which started at Navy Pier. Organizers had posted banners hoping to help people find their organizations in which they wished to march.

“But there were too many people — there was nowhere to move around,” Beyne said. “It turns out putting up all those signs was a waste of time.”

[\[AT PEACE, AT LAST: AFTER 11 YEARS AND AN EMOTIONAL PARADE, VIETNAM VETS FINALLY FEEL WELCOME \]](#)

The parade started half an hour early to help alleviate the congestion, and marchers traveled through the Loop, including a memorable stretch of LaSalle Street with ticker tape and confetti, before ending at the Grant Park Band Shell. Dennis DeYoung was among the performers who entertained the crowd through the afternoon.

“According to the city, which is the figures that we use in our book, there were 176,000 marchers, but we’ll never know the exact number,” Beyne said. “Some of the papers said it was more than 200,000. There were half a million spectators cheering us along the route. It was beyond all of our expectations...It was finally the acknowledgement that we needed.”

The acknowledgement helped many people far beyond that day in June. McGill said veterans found others dealing with lingering health issues that were often left unspoken. Post-traumatic stress disorder and a wide range of medical conditions linked to the use of toxic herbicides (known popularly as Agent Orange) are two significant issues that soon came to the forefront after years of neglect.

“We’re still dealing with these issues — we will for the rest of our lives,” Beyne said. “We want to make sure that people are getting the treatment and support they deserve — that they’re entitled to.”

Both Beyne and McGill have written previously about their experiences in the war, primarily for family and friends. But this collaboration was special to them as a way to ensure that his event that was so crucial to them gets remembered.

“We didn’t talk about it a lot before we retired, like most veterans,” McGill said. “You’re busy with jobs and family. But now that we have more time, we wanted to get this down. We want people to remember this event and how important it was to the city and the veterans who finally got their day to celebrate.”

“I feel privileged to have participated in it,” Beyne said.

The book is available on Amazon at https://www.amazon.com/Day-Finally-Came-Back-Vietnam/dp/1667891596/ref=sr_1_1?

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