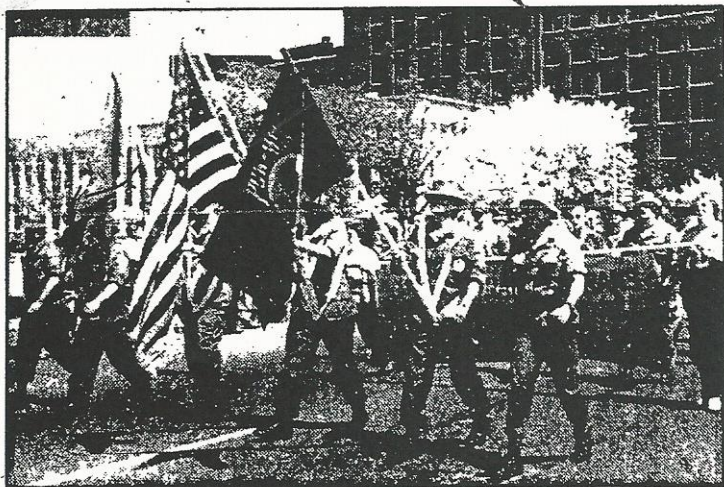


OPINION

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RICK CAMPBELL

Kalamazoo-area Vietnam veterans on parade

Kalamazoo parade helped the healing

Kalamazoo has claimed a lot of "firsts" but none has carried the warmth and emotion generated by "The Parade That Never Was" Sunday.

Thousands of area residents lined the downtown route of the first parade honoring Vietnam veterans in the United States. It was long overdue.

Since the fall of Saigon 10 years ago today the gulf that opened between veterans of Vietnam and the rest of our nation has been a shameful aspect of that bitter conflict. Sunday, at least for a few hours of a glorious spring day, that division was bridged.

The parade was an all-American one, complete with clowns and fire engines, commercial floats and baton twirlers. We thought it interesting that the crowd saved its heartfelt applause for the veterans themselves. This was a crowd that had come not to celebrate war, but the men who fought it. Many of the veterans seemed to sense that, and shouted "thank you's" back to the crowd.

There were memorable sights as the veterans passed by, reminders of how very different a war this was than America had known. In camouflage and floppy-brimmed fatigue

hats, the veterans were as informal as the fighting itself. They went to war as individuals rather than units, and they returned home the same way. To some in the crowd, the thunderous clatter of helicopter gunships flying overhead was a jarring note on a peaceful Sunday afternoon. But the cheers and clenched-fist salutes they elicited from the veterans helped the watchers better understand how powerful a symbol of the war the helicopters were. We doubt that there were very many spectators watching those ragged lines of marching veterans who were not close to tears.

And lastly, the marchers included several with physical disabilities, a reminder that in a war famous for its mental stress, 300,000 men came home with physical scars.

A salute is due Janice and Thomas Emig, and Jerry DeRyke of the Kalamazoo chapter of the Vietnam Veterans of America, whose imagination and energy brought the parade together. A salute too, to the many Kalamazooans who turned out on a beautiful Sunday afternoon with many other attractions. Few could have been as rewarding.