

Parade next Sunday will say thanks to Vietnam veterans

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A parade, speakers and concerts will be the order of the day, Sunday, April 28, as Kalamazoo says thanks to the men and women who served in the Vietnam War.

"The Parade That Never Was," as the organizers call it, will kick

off at 2 p.m. at the Upjohn parking lot at the corner of Portage and Lovell streets, then proceed west on Lovell to Park Street, turn north to Michigan Avenue, then east to Portage Street.

The parade is the idea of Tom and Janice Emit of Parchment who thought Vietnam veterans de-

served a parade. Assisting them is Jerry DeRyke, president of the Kalamazoo Chapter of the Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA).

"My husband and I were talking about how vets are misunderstood," Mrs. Emit said. "The war was so misunderstood, and the persons who took the flak for it were

the men and women who served in Vietnam, and I thought something should be done about it."

What started as an idea three months ago has bloomed into what promises to be one of the largest

Please see **PARADE, D2**

PILOT

Continued from D1

farmers doing their thing. That was the sad thing. Interrogations were not pleasant affairs," said Ross. "Brutalizing the innocent was no way to make friends."

Ross said it took about two months of flying combat before he lost his youthful idealism that what he was doing was right.

"I had these grand ideas that if my country asked, it was a just cause. I couldn't fathom my country asking his young men to fight for an unjust cause," said Ross.

"Free-fire zones made me change my mind. In a free-fire zone, you can kill anybody — men, women, children — they are all considered the enemy," said Ross.

"But what I couldn't understand was how an area could change from free-fire to friendly and then back to free-fire in just a couple of days."

What also changed Ross' mind were the seemingly senseless, repeated battles for kills.

"The battle might go on for three days, and cost 100 or more American lives. They take the bodies out in cargo nets slung under Chinook helicopters. Then the generals would pull our guys off the hill, the enemy would move back in, and the battle would start all over.

"After a while I learned that in Nam the only thing important was the day you went home."

Ross still keeps contact with many of his fellow pilots through the recently formed Vietnam Helicopters Association. It was through contacts in the association that Good Morning America anchor man Steve Bell heard about Ross' film.

ABC flew Ross to Washington, D.C., to meet Bell on April 1, and where he was interviewed by the Vietnam Memorial. "I had never been to the memorial before," said Ross.

"It was every bit as tough as I expected it to be. It's hard to look at a slab of marble with 58,000 names on it, many good friends and know that that's all that's left of them. That's our legacy to the war in Vietnam.

In the Good Morning America segment, Ross is seen reading the names of the dead on the memorial. He talks with Bell, also a Vietnam veteran, about the war, including the experience of being shot down near the Laotian border and his narrow escape from the Vietnamese.

Ross' combat career was ended when his helicopter plunged through a triple jungle canopy, breaking his back in several places and causing permanent nerve damage. Amazingly, said Ross, the other nine soldiers on board walked away from the wreck.

Today, Ross lives with his wife, Stephanie, in a tidy ranch house on 8th Street in Oshtemo Township, and he works as an associate with Chuck Jaqua Realtors.

For his role in America's longest war, Ross received two purple hearts, the bronze star for valor, and the distinguished flying cross, and he received a direct commission to the rank of captain prior to his medical discharge in 1971. The Blue Ghost unit as a whole received the Presidential Unit Citation.

"I'm proud of flying helicopters, and the job we did," said Ross. "But to me, all the war means is 58,000 dead, and 350,000 bodies maimed. But you know the number of those killed would have been far greater if it wasn't for the job we did, getting the injured out and to a field hospital."

Despite the honor heaped upon him and his fellow pilots, Ross reserves harsh words for leadership that asked his generation to fight.

"If (the war) wasn't illegal, it was immoral to ask people to die in a no-win, no-turf war," Ross said.

"I dearly love this country, and I will lay my life on the line if required. But if we ever get into another Vietnam-style war where our finest young people are asked to give their lives up for no cause, I will personally get as many young people into Canada as I can."

PARADE

Continued from D1

parades ever held in Kalamazoo, with 50 units and more than 1,400 persons scheduled to participate as of late last week.

"We had the idea that we were only going to have 350 people," Mrs. Emit said. "The people who call are real excited, especially the ones who were in Vietnam. They call and say, 'Oh thanks, this is what we needed.' They feel like they were rejected from the com-

munity," she said.

The Emits, neither of whom is a veteran, have attracted some national attention with their parade, which they say will be the first ever held for veterans of the Vietnam War. The couple received a letter from President Ronald Reagan thanking them. The Emits were interviewed recently by the national newspaper USA Today.

Mrs. Emit said there is a "99.9 percent chance" that a jet flyover

will signal the start of the parade, and an equal chance of a squadron of Army Huey helicopters flying in from Holland.

Units that have promised to be in the parade are VVA chapters from as far away as Detroit, Army Reserve medics, and members of the 101st Airborne Division. Mrs. Emit said one special float is sure to pack the day with emotion, as disabled Vietnam Veterans call over a loudspeaker for spectators who

are veterans to join in the parade.

Following the parade, Bronson Park will be the scene of concerts by local bands, speakers, and a magic show.

Bands include Rene Meave and the Thunder Band, the Back Pages, the Eastland Community Pop Band, and folksinger Gloria Larrieu. Scheduled speakers include Luann Neuseledt on female veterans, and Sue Scott on POW-MIA's.