



# Welcome home!

**MIKE GALLAGHER**  
 GAZETTE STAFF WRITER  
 AND THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

It began quietly, but within minutes the clapping and shouts of "thank you" filled the air as several hundred Vietnam veterans marched in Kalamazoo Sunday afternoon to receive the praise of a nation some believed would never come.

More than 10 years after armed conflict between the U.S. and North Vietnam had ended, Kalamazoons rolled out the red carpet for their sons and daughters and finally held "The Parade That Never Was."

The local parade was among several nationwide celebrations honoring the Vietnam veter-

ans.

The event drew the attention of national news media and a congratulatory telegram from President Reagan.

Reagan's telegram to parade sponsors read: "I can think of no finer effort or tribute."

Decked out in full uniform or sporting only a beret, the former soldiers fell into formations and marched proudly through the throngs of people, estimated at 5,000 in number and lined along the mile-long parade route.

Milling around shortly before the parade began, talk among the veterans centered around

Please see PARADE, A2



Huey's flew by (top) and so did the years as Vietnam veterans such as Larry Leffew of Portage (left), Bill Black (with his three-year-old son Buck of Kalamazoo at right), and members of the Detroit Chapter of the Vietnam Veterans of America (below) were welcomed home. The red carpet was rolled out Sunday in downtown Kalamazoo.

GAZETTE PHOTOS BY RICK CAMPBELL



# PARADE

Continued from A1

faraway places with strange-sounding names and more than a decade old in their memories.

But for the men, names of cities such as Da Lat, Quang Ngai, Hue and Da Nang were spoken of with respect, hatred or with resigned acceptance.

More than one veteran wiped moist eyes as the men marched by with chests swelled, often carrying a banner emblazoned with their old platoon's insignia.

Intermittent cheers broke out among the parade watchers as they spotted a father, husband or family friend taking his place among the marching veterans.

Along with the cheers came a small feeling of shame among some in the viewing crowd. That shame, said several people, was felt because it had taken so long to honor men whose only mistake was fighting in an unpopular war that the American people wanted only to forget.

"I drove here from Pennsylvania, not because this was supposed to be a great parade, but because in a way it was a debt I owed, along with a lot of others, to these men who fought for their country," said Paul Samuelson, 48.

"There is a feeling here . . . that you just can't put into words. It's not only our saying thanks, but more importantly it gave these

guys (veterans) a chance to say 'you're welcome, America,'" Samuelson said.

One participant said the parade helped veterans win back some long-lost pride.

"The war's over; it's been 10 years," said Jim Colwell of Garden City, a member of the Disabled American Veterans. "The timing's right for something like this.

"Vietnam was a war we lost; maybe that's why nobody wanted to rejoice during and immediately after the conflict," Colwell said. "It was like, if they backed the veteran then they were backing the war . . . After a while, you didn't want to wear your uniform or even acknowledge that you were in Vietnam."

"A lot of people just didn't want to hear the veterans' stories," added Janice Emig, who helped organize the celebration along with her husband Thomas and the Kalamazoo chapter of the Vietnam Veterans of America.

"A lot thought the veterans were all murderers, drug users, a bunch of wrecks," Mrs. Emig added.

U.S. Rep. Howard Wolpe marched along with the veterans and later spoke of the need for a "long overdue thank you.

"I have never been so moved by a ceremony that was so much de-

served," Wolpe said. "It was a war that divided a nation, but with that division also came feelings of anger towards the men that defended our position.

"They, our veterans, endured a double burden for their patriotism. They fought in a war no one wanted and returned home to a public who only wanted to quickly forget its involvement. There was debt owed and today was a step toward repaying that debt to these men," Wolpe added.

Noting the turnout for the parade, Emig, a Parchment resident, spoke emotionally about the event, citing cooperation between the city, the federal government and the veterans.

"The thing that meant the most to me was the clapping," Emig said. "It just wasn't here, it started and then spread throughout the whole parade route and it continued non-stop. People cared and wanted to tell these men 'thank you' and it sure came through to everyone."

Asked why he spent more than three months preparing for the this parade, Emig looked out over the smiling, marching veterans and said, "It was for them. They were owed."

But the spirit of shared feelings exhibited here was twofold, as one veteran riding in a truck cab

leaned out the window and yelled "thanks, just thanks," to the waving crowd.

The loudest applause was reserved for the handicapped veterans, some who walked with crutches or rolled along in their wheelchairs.

Aided by two friends, one man in a wheelchair waved and smiled broadly as he passed the clapping crowd yelling, "thanks, thanks, thank you."

Parade spectator Al Kuras of Kalamazoo stood quietly along the parade route scanning the marchers for his brother, Wally. "This is just wonderful, just terrific," Kuras said.

Adding to the occasion were veterans from VVA chapters from as far away as Detroit, Army Reserve medics and members of the 101st Airborne Division.

Army Huey helicopters roared overhead as the parade passed by below.

Several of the marching groups saluted smartly as they passed the reviewing stand holding Kalamazoo Mayor Francis Hamilton, Emig and others.

Flags, feathers, boots and berets were worn by the veterans who, though sometimes slightly out of step, marched with a sense of pride that was obvious to those watching.

After the parade, veterans, families and friends visited Bronson Park for a sun-filled afternoon of performing local bands, speakers and a magic show.

Groups paused in the park to read the plaque embedded in the Vietnam Memorial stone honoring the veterans.

Summing up her feelings about the day, Mrs. Irene Centers, 61, of Port Huron, said: "It was nice. I don't know who got more out of it, the veterans or the people there that wanted to thank them, but it was nice."

Across the nation people gathered to hold their own ceremonies for veterans who made it back from Southeast Asia and for those who did not.

In Woburn, Mass., veterans honored one of the last men to die in Vietnam ground action. Members of the Vietnam Combat Veterans Association chapter wore combat fatigues and put up small American flags on graves in Woodbrook Cemetery.

But they jabbed a rifle into the earth near the grave of Marine Cpl. Charles McMahon Jr. and hung a helmet on it.

McMahon was killed in a rocket attack on Tap Son Nhut Air Base on April 19, 1975, one day before the United States pulled the last of its ground troops out of Vietnam.

He was 21. The Marine who died with him, Darwin Judge, of Iowa, was 19.

"We like to keep it private but if it'll do the veterans any good and get them the recognition they need we'll do this," he said.

Vietnamese who lost a homeland in the war also gathered to remember the day.

In Nebraska, Vietnamese-Americans — about 100 adults and several dozen children — gathered Saturday at Omaha's Norris Junior High School "to lament the fall of our fatherland," said Ho Lai, one of the organizers.

The program of the Vietnamese Nationalists Association included speeches and Vietnamese music and food in the school auditorium, which had been decorated with the red-striped flags of South Vietnam.

In Indianapolis, the 2,200-member Vietnamese-Americans Association sponsored a memorial Saturday at the Indiana War Memorial to thank the U.S. veterans.

"Ten years ago we got here because of the generosity of the United States and we're grateful," said Loc To, a spokesman.

"We also have a high regard for the American men and women who served during the conflict. Because of them we got a democracy and could live in freedom," To said.