

## Our Forgotten Heroes



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WHEN General William C. Westmoreland addressed the State Adjutants General at their February meeting in Washington, he asked that the National Guard help initiate "welcome home" ceremonies and other recognition for Viet Nam returnees.

His request is reasonable and appropriate. The National Guard is the most visible link between many American communities and the Military Establishment. It lives and functions in *both* worlds, and with full propriety can encourage local communities to demonstrate their appreciation to returning soldiers, sailors and airmen.

In the years of our involvement in Viet Nam, U.S. servicemen more often than not have completed their tours of combat duty, returned home, and resumed their civilian pursuits without the slightest gesture of appreciation from local citizens. Only occasionally have their achievements and sacrifices been adequately recognized and appreciated. More than the veterans of any previous war, they have become America's forgotten heroes.

Viet Nam unquestionably has been one of our most unpopular, controversial conflicts. It has created schisms in our society that will be long in healing. Regardless of differing opinions on the larger issues, however, the men who have carried the burden of the actual fighting deserve America's respect and acclaim. They have performed magnificently under the most adverse conditions, and deserve personal recognition for the sacrifices they have made, the hardships they have endured, and the feats they have performed in battle against a skilled, ruthless adversary. They have earned their day in the limelight and local leaders of the National Guard are in a unique position to help them get it.

Activities honoring Viet Nam returnees serve another purpose with which most Guardsmen will not quarrel. They tend to take the spotlight off the destructive, headline-grabbing minority who demonstrate their own brand of citizenship by burning Draft cards, desecrating American flags, and scrawling obscenities on walls.

Along with General Westmoreland's suggestion, another reminder is in order. The National Guard has men and units of its own in South Viet Nam, Korea, Japan, Thailand and elsewhere. They, too, will be returning to the United States and civilian life at spaced intervals this year. They deserve to be welcomed and publicly applauded by their fellow-Guardsmen and by their communities.

By their sacrifices and the exceptional caliber of their performance, they have earned almost universal praise from the Active Army and Air Force Commanders under whom they served. They thus have brought great credit to the entire National Guard, not to themselves alone. We must not let their homecoming go unnoticed, and this, too, requires forethought, initiative and enthusiasm at the State and local level.

There is a practical, as well as moral, need to focus public attention on the outstanding professional performance of mobilized Guardsmen. A Nationwide sampling of public opinion last year revealed a wide gap between the Guard's actual capability as a military force and public awareness of that capability. The return of Guardsmen from overseas, in many cases from extended combat duty, offers an excellent opportunity to tell the story of their professional competence, their actual accomplishments, and their outstanding record.

It is a story we tell with pride!

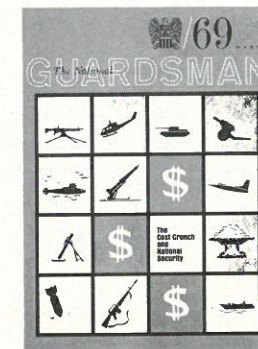
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