

Day of recognition

Crowd of 102 from and around Jasper County travel to capitol to pay respects

By Christopher Braunschweig Newton Daily News

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Christopher Braunschweig/Daily News

There used to be a time when Vietnam War veteran Gary Clemon would not speak openly of his deployment, which he said was rather common back in those days. Protests and radical anti-war demonstrations across the country divided the populace and further isolated returning soldiers like Clemon, who felt it was safer to remain silent.

Nowadays, several decades after the fall of Saigon and U.S. troops evacuated the country, that silence continues to break, thanks in part to ceremonies like the official Iowa Vietnam Veterans Recognition Day, which honors and commemorates those who fought and died in service to their country and did not receive a welcome home.

The Tuesday morning ceremony was held at the Iowa Vietnam War Monument on the Iowa State Capitol grounds. Clemon was one of 102

individuals from or around Jasper County who attended the event. This particular ceremony, he told the Newton Daily News, was especially important to him. It had been 50 years since a dozen friends and members of his battalion were killed during the Vietnam War.

Three years after joining the Iowa Army National Guard in 1965, Clemon and his 900 or so members headquartered in Sioux City were activated for Vietnam, sent to Fort Carson for training and ready to serve as individual replacements depending on the military occupational specialty. About 400 troops, Clemon included, were sent to Vietnam.

"Out of those 400, 12 of us are on that wall," Clemon said. "Killed in action."

Clemon was 23 years old by the time he arrived to the foreign land as a gun squad leader; he was considered an "old man" by many of his peers at the time, including himself. He still remembers them to this day and commemorates his fellow veterans' memories by regularly contributing Honor Guard duties for military funerals. Recognizing veterans is important to Clemon.

"It's payback," he said. "It's to pay respects to the guys that didn't come home. It's the least I can do in their honor because they gave the ultimate sacrifice."

Doug Bishop, a veteran and chair of the Jasper County Veterans Alliance, said two busloads of people, paid for by Jasper County Veterans Affairs, gathered at the Newton American Legion Post 111 to be transported to the capitol to take part in the Iowa Vietnam Veterans Recognition Day ceremonies for the eighth year in a row.

Of the 102 people from Jasper County who attended the event, Bishop estimated about 50 to 60 were Vietnam War era veterans.

"They came from just about every community in the county," Bishop said. Fred Dimon, of Newton, said this year marked his fourth or fifth trip to celebrate Vietnam Veterans Recognition Day. Serving as a pilot for the

U.S. Air Force during the Vietnam War, Dimon particularly enjoyed the honored keynote speaker Kenneth Quinn, president of the World Food Prize Foundation and former U.S. Ambassador to Cambodia.

"It's just a nice program they have up there every year," Dimon said. In addition to the traditional military customs like the posting of colors, rifle salute and the sounding of Taps, remarks were given by Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds and Lt. Gov. Adam Gregg. U.S. Marine Corps Captain Dan Gannon, who is also the chair of the Iowa Commission of Veterans Affairs, officiated the ceremony.

Gannon said the folks visiting from Jasper County were "the biggest crowd" he recognized at the event, which he estimated had attracted close to 400 or 450 people. The ceremony itself was "emotional," he said.

The Iowa Vietnam War Monument served as the backdrop to the commemoration. The memorial plaque was dedicated to Iowans who died during or as a result of the Vietnam War. Their names — all 869 of them — are inscribed on the granite wall.

"I got some friends that are on there," Clemon said. "It's about paying respect."

Contact Christopher Braunschweig at 641-792-3121 ext. 6560 or cbraunschweig@newtondailynews.com

