

# Vets ponder Vietnam, Iraq and respect

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When decorated retired Army Capt. David Christian came home wounded from Vietnam, war protests were in full swing and he endured being called a warmonger and seeing students tear down the American flag and toss it on the ground.

Today, more often than not, soldiers returning from Iraq are treated to a hero's welcome, whether with hometown parades or simply with the respect of friends and community. So while not everyone supports the current war in Iraq, most people support the military, a change noted by Christian and other Central Floridians with military ties interviewed for this story.

"You need the morale and you need the country buoyed behind you," Christian said. "The country

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**Reunion.** David Christian (right) talks Friday with Tommy Milan about today's reunion of the E-7 Recon Platoon. Christian is being nominated for the Medal of Honor.

## Homecoming different for Vietnam veterans

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turned on the [Vietnam] war, and, not realizing it, turned on the veterans."

A Gainesville native who now lives in Pennsylvania, Christian, 55, is in Central Florida for a military reunion and to be honored by his former troops. At a ceremony today in Lake Mary, members of the 1968 E-7 Recon Platoon plan to nominate him for the Medal of Honor.

Christian, who was one of the youngest, most decorated officers of the Vietnam War, received the Distinguished Service Cross — awarded for extraordinary heroism — but some paperwork was missing from his nomination for the Medal of Honor, a sergeant in Christian's unit discovered recently.

His men plan to ask U.S. Reps. Ric Keller, R-Orlando, and Tom Feeney, R-Orlando, to take up the cause. Christian said he's going along with the effort because it's important to those with whom he fought.

"I told them it doesn't matter to me," Christian said. "For my men, I would do anything. These are guys I carried off the battlefield. I kept them alive and they kept me alive."

The war shaped Christian's life. He works as a military analyst for television networks including Fox and CNN, is an advisor to Congress on national



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**Honor.** David Christian proudly wears one of his 7 Purple Hearts on his lapel most of the time.

defense, foreign relations and armed services and is a veterans' advocate.

Although public sentiment against the war hurt him when he returned gravely wounded, the climate began to change with former President Ronald Reagan, whose funeral was Friday. Reagan told the troops they were special and their service was valued, Christian said, and the country seemed to pick up on the Great Communicator's upbeat outlook.

Fast forward to Sept. 11, 2001. Whereas Vietnam was partly an ideological war waged far away in a country that hadn't hurt the United States,

the attacks on U.S. soil ignited a fervor of patriotism, stoking support for the military, some veterans said.

Still, some fear that Iraq could turn into another Vietnam if the fighting drags on much longer and the U.S. suffers many more casualties. Part of what turned people off to Vietnam was the 58,000 American lives lost.

Even those with strong military backgrounds sometimes question the wisdom of the way that war was fought — and ultimately lost.

"That was a political nightmare," said Linda Treat, 46, of Kissimmee, whose son, Ryan, is an Army sergeant in Iraq, and whose husband fought in Vietnam. "We paid for it with a lot of blood."

Those who survived Vietnam longed for gratitude but often received scorn instead. But even though public backing for the Iraq war is waning, veterans remain held in esteem.

When Sgt. Chester Lampman, 29, came home from Iraq in February, he was greeted by friends and family, a huge reception and yellow ribbons as far as he could see. He thinks Vietnam veterans, including his father, Lewis, should have been feted the same way rather than derided.

"To come back and to be treated that way is not right," said Lampman, 29, who grew up on a dairy farm in Clay City,

Pa. "It's unpatriotic."

Evie Dixon, 55, of Inverness was a Vietnam War protester years ago at the University of Maryland. But the now-retired special-education teacher went on to marry a World War II veteran and develop a fierce loyalty for U.S. troops.

"I think any of our soldiers who went over there and fought should get recognition when they come back regardless of what we think of the war," said Dixon, who was in west Osceola County on Friday for a military reunion with her husband, Sam, 78.

Christian draws a number of parallels between Vietnam and Iraq. Both were guerrilla wars. Both were missions to win hearts and minds. Both were marred by scandals: Vietnam by the My Lai massacre of civilians, Operation Iraqi Freedom by the Abu Ghraib prison scandal.

Both wars also dragged on, creating doubt in the minds of some Americans. But Christian is convinced the country can't afford to back out now.

"We have to stay the course for the safety of the people of the United States of America," Christian said. "Sometimes it's difficult to stay the course. We like quick and fast fixes in America."

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