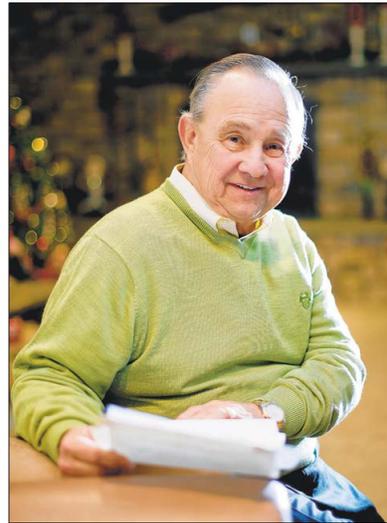




Staff photo by Graham Cullen

Robert "Bob" Wyatt Jr.



Staff photo by Bill Green

Otis "Eddie" Smith Jr.

BATTLE SCARS

Vietnam veterans haunted by memories decades after war

By SYLVIA CARIGNAN and NANCY LAVIN
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Otis "Eddie" Smith Jr. choked up as he recounted the advice his mother gave him as a 20-year-old Marine about to depart for Vietnam.

"She said, 'You do what's right in your heart, and you'll come back to me,'" he said.

As he recalled that moment, his eyes filled with tears. He stood up and left the room, apologizing to a reporter.

Just as his mother hoped, Smith returned from his yearlong tour in Vietnam unscathed, at least to the naked eye. But the 66-year-old Ljamsville resident has continued to cope with the mental and emotional ramifications.

Most often, it's the memories that inspire tears — things he never talked about until recently. Some pieces of his past he is discussing for the first time in this interview — of water running down dirt paths stained red with blood and bodies left on the side of the Que Son Mountains for days before helicopters could retrieve them.

It doesn't take a war story to bring on waves of emotion, though.

"I can be driving down the road, and my emotions just start for no reason," Smith said.

He recalled a recent conversation with a fellow customer at Home Depot. The woman told him that her son was a machine gunner in the Marine Corps. He immediately thought back to a machine



gunner in his squad with the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, who was killed in combat.

Fresh tears filled his eyes as he explained the connection.

"It really shook me up," he said.

Smith is not alone. About 271,000 Vietnam theater veterans have post-traumatic stress disorder, as well as a specific subcategory called war-zone post-traumatic stress disorder, according to a 2015 study published by the American Medical Association. The subcategory applies specifically to people who experienced trauma in a violent war zone.

About a third of those veterans also suffer from depression, more than four decades after the war.

Smith returned home

from frontline combat in 1970. For the first 40 years, he threw himself into his work, rising through the ranks to various leadership positions for large construction and development companies in Maryland.

It kept him busy, kept the difficult thoughts at bay. When those memories caught up with him, he turned to alcohol for comfort.

He gave up drinking after he realized it was becoming a problem. He said his first marriage — he's now on his third — ended in part because of his inability to manage the waves of anger and sadness that overtook him.

Even then, he didn't talk about it.

(See WAR A6)

EDITOR'S NOTE

This is the first in a six-part series about the stories and sacrifices of local men and women during the Vietnam War. The series complements a Maryland Public Television initiative coming this summer honoring veterans of the war.

BIOGRAPHIES

Otis "Eddie" Smith Jr.
Branch: U.S. Marine Corps
Rank: Corporal
Service dates: March 11, 1969, to Aug. 1, 1970

Commendations:
 National Defense Service Medal, Vietnam Service Medal, Republic of Vietnam Campaign Medal, Republic of Vietnam Gallantry Cross with Palm, Combat Action Ribbon
 His battalion also received a meritorious unit commendation from the secretary of the Navy for actions against North Vietnamese and Communist insurgent forces from Oct. 24 to Dec. 8, 1969.

Robert "Bob" Wyatt Jr.

Branch: U.S. Navy
Rank: Builder Petty Officer 3rd Class
Service dates: Aug. 21, 1967, to Dec. 16, 1968

Commendations:
 National Defense Service Medal, Vietnam Service Medal, Republic of Vietnam Campaign Medal



Photos courtesy of Robert "Bob" Wyatt Jr.

Navy veteran Robert "Bob" Wyatt Jr. spent much of his time in Vietnam in a refugee village called Vinh Dai. American helicopters sprayed Agent Orange on the foliage near the village.



Navy veteran Robert "Bob" Wyatt Jr. recruited some of the local residents to build a school for the community.

War

(Continued from A1)

"I'm the type of person that liked to keep things suppressed, private," he admitted. Shortly before he retired in 2011, the flashbacks, nightmares, anger and bouts of uncontrollable crying began anew.

He spent Christmas of that year in treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder in the Martinsburg Veterans Affairs Medical Center in West Virginia, where he stayed for several months. When he got out, he continued to see a therapist for some time.

"They really helped me," he said of the treatment center doctors and ensuing counselors. "They taught me not to suppress."

Ronald Hoover is the post-traumatic stress disorder research portfolio manager at the Military Operational Medicine Research Program at Fort Detrick.

As a licensed psychologist, Hoover has treated veterans with the disorder. Its symptoms include an inability to recall key parts of the traumatic event or experience positive emotions, disruptions in normal sleep patterns and vivid flashbacks.

"For some people, it's so salient that it's almost as if they're reliving the experience," Hoover said.

In general, he said, veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder have a state of heightened anxiety.

"Things that require the body and the mind to relax, such as sleep — they don't happen the way they do in people who don't suffer from PTSD," Hoover said.

But the disorder is likely to affect more than the brain. In her research, Marti Jett has found that post-traumatic stress disorder can age combat veterans more quickly.

Jett is chief scientist of the Systems Biology Enterprise at the U.S. Army Center for Environmental Health Research at Fort Detrick. In a collaborative study with other research institutions, Jett is analyzing the genomes of recent combat veterans in their 20s and 30s and active-duty service members.

So far, they have found that the DNA repair mechanisms in their veteran test subjects have been weakened by the disorder, adding years to their lives. "They look seven years older than they are," Jett said.

Jett's study excluded Vietnam War veterans because they are likely to have what are "comorbid" illnesses, which in this case are condi-

Maryland Public Television salutes Vietnam veterans

Maryland Public Television's salute to Maryland service members of the Vietnam era has been three years in the making. The salute is a thank-you to those who worked and fought in an unpopular war. It will culminate with a two-day event called "Landing Zone Maryland." Tens of thousands of people are expected to attend.

Landing Zone Maryland

■ June 18, 10 a.m. to 10 p.m.

■ June 19, 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.

■ Maryland State Fairgrounds, 2200 York Road, Lutherville-Timonium

■ There will be a tribute ceremony, a memorial chair ceremony, a motorcycle honor ride, family activities, vendors, Vietnam-era military vehicles, entertainers and an art gallery. For more information, visit <http://vietnam.mpt.org/izmaryland>.

Maryland Vietnam War Stories

■ Three-part documentary film

■ Airing May 24, 25 and 26 on Maryland Public Television

Maryland Public Television Salutes Vietnam Veterans Traveling Exhibit

Features artifacts, current-day and wartime images of men and women along with their memories of the war. To request that the traveling exhibit stop in your town, contact Maryland Public Television at 410-581-4182.

tions such as depression that occur simultaneously with post-traumatic stress disorder.

"There are a lot of comorbid illnesses that occur as people become 65 and older," Jett said. "It's difficult to understand what may have been from war and from their lives."

Navy veteran Robert "Bob" Wyatt Jr., who lives in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, developed post-traumatic stress disorder in 1968 and 1969 after spending nearly every day under fire for more than 300 days while working as a Seabee in a Vietnamese refugee village.

He didn't carry a weapon or wear a military uniform while he was in the village, which made him safer from opposing Vietnamese forces but a target of American forces at the same time, Wyatt said.

It was an assignment he worked hard to get. His father, a World War II veteran, tried to persuade him not to enlist. At the time, Wyatt was married and had a newborn son.

"I could not see what my son would say if I tried to avoid my country's call," Wyatt said.

Once he enlisted, he became part of the Seabees, Navy units that build everything from buildings to bridges, and are also known as the U.S. Naval Construction Force. At the refugee camp, Wyatt was helping to build a school for Vietnamese children.

But as someone who grew up in a devoted, religious family, he wanted to do more. He assisted a chaplain and gave last rites to hundreds of dying service members in

strives to counsel veterans who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder and help them find jobs and permanent homes.

Wyatt's approach is to teach people with PTSD that the illness physically alters a part of the brain that stores and recalls memories. Veterans in Wyatt's program get counseling and support from their peers as they work toward a stable life.

"We only know it's working because our men's lives are changing," he said.

Building Veterans houses about 10 veterans in a home in Brunswick, as veterans move in and graduate throughout the year. Wyatt hopes to renovate a second Brunswick house this year to serve more veterans.

As for the hope of curing the disorder, Hoover said psychological research and treatment have come a long way, but PTSD is still a challenge.

"I think the objective of a 80 to 90 percent cure rate is certainly our target. I don't think we are there, for a variety of reasons," he said.

Some veterans never seek help, or they get help, but don't keep up with their treatment program.

One of the treatment approaches is prolonged exposure therapy, which encourages a patient to talk through the traumatic memories, learn ways to control breathing and relaxation, and practice the methods in real-world situations.

"The VA invested very heavily in making sure their providers were well-trained in prolonged exposure therapy," Hoover said.

Even after treatment, Smith doesn't talk much about what he saw in Vietnam, even among other veterans.

How do you start a conversation with someone who never witnessed bullets whizzing past his head? How can that person understand what it was like to see a room full of refugees attacked just as they sat down to lunch? Or the time you watched fellow riflemen shoot down a Vietnamese person running from a village, laughing when they discover it was a young girl?

Still, Smith considers himself one of the ones who's "made it."

He has a home, a wife and a family. He enjoys golf and keeps a foot in property development.

He can go to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington now, too. When it was first unveiled, he left quickly, unable to stay.

But the memories that accompany a visit to the wall haven't disappeared.

"I literally hear the kids screaming, the gunfire, all the noise," he said.

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Follow Sylvia Carignan on Twitter: @SylviaCarignan.



Courtesy photo

Otis "Eddie" Smith Jr.

Vietnam.

Wyatt remembers being bombarded with mortar rounds at least once or twice a day. While he was out collecting sand and building materials for the school, he often heard shooting.

Despite the danger, he enjoyed the work. "I was probably high on adrenaline," he said.

Wyatt was never physically injured. His troubles and illnesses developed after he came home.

"We didn't know what PTSD was, but we knew there was something wrong with me," he said.

He was uncomfortable in crowds and quick to anger. He had chronic headaches from the time he came home from Vietnam until just a few months ago, he said.

Nearly 15 years ago, doctors found he had developed prostate cancer, which Wyatt believes is a consequence of his exposure to Agent Orange.

He hit a turning point in his own struggle with post-traumatic stress disorder when he found out that the disorder has physical effects on the brain.

He started Building Veterans, an organization that

