

# Local

## SANTA BARBARA COUNTY NEWS

# Remembering a complicated war

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Quickly dispelling any notion that it was just business-as-usual in the Sierra Madre ballroom of Fess Parker's Doubletree Resort, two mannequins stood sentry before the doorway, Wednesday at lunchtime. One wore American GI garb, circa 1960s, and the other was dressed as a Vietnam soldier, bearing the sign "Hi, I'm Charlie. Welcome to Vietnam."

Inside the ballroom, the subject of the Vietnam War, its history, its veterans and the shifting public understanding of that complicated and protracted war was front and center, as the focus of the latest meeting of the Channel City Club, and the Pierre Claeysens Veterans Foundation.

"Vietnam: The War and Its Veterans 50 Years On," was the title of the fifth in a series of such military-honoring luncheon gatherings co-hosted by the Claeysens Foundation, and the first to aim the spotlight at Vietnam.

In a well-organized 90-minute presentation, a full house in the ballroom — an audience well-stocked with veterans, some in uniform — were given a strong picture, chronology and insight to some of the tragic effects of the war through testimonies of eleven locally-based veterans. Every branch of the military was represented, and each panelist told a story shedding light on different times and places during the war.

As moderator, Navy Lt. John Blankenship, a co-founder of the Claeysens Foundation told the crowd, the foundation's motto, "Never Forgotten," outlines a goal "even more relevant today, as the whole military is shrinking in number. The need for massing armies and navies is no longer necessary or affordable. The fewer numbers do not reduce the need



KENNETH SONG/NEWS-PRESS

**Army Capt. Fred Clough lectures about events leading up to the United States' involvement in Vietnam at the Sierra Madre ballroom of Fess Parker's Doubletree Resort on Wednesday.**

to respect, understand and support our troops. In fact, it is of absolute, vital importance that our veterans are honored."

By way of easing into the subject of Vietnam, the program opened with a telling montage of clips from well-known movies about the Vietnam War — "the Hollywood version," as Mr. Blankenship commented — including Robin Williams' hip riffing DJ in "Good Morning, Vietnam," Robert Duvall's classic quote from "Apocalypse Now" — "I love the smell of Napalm in the morning" — and "Forrest Gump," in which the loveably naïve Tom Hanks character quips, "We were always looking for a guy named Charlie." In this montage, the more somber and mortal mood of Oliver Stone's "Platoon," with Samuel Barber's mournful "Adagio for Strings" as a theme, segued into the actual testimonials of the uniformed veterans onstage, many of them officers.

Army Capt. Fred Clough laid out the sequence of historical events leading America into the Vietnam conflagration, from its early military advisor role in the late '50s and early '60s to the full-scale conflict in the mid-'60s. Mr. Clough was part of the MATS (Mobile Advisory Team), which often involved "long, hot slogs through the rice paddies and infrequent contact with the VC. It was at night when the VC was the most dangerous," he said, recalling one deadly attack by night.

"These villagers with whom I worked were basically farmers, who mainly wanted to be protected from the VC. I liked and respected them."

Capt. Joe Danely recalled being a freshman at UCSB in 1958, who wound up in Vietnam for deployments in '65 and '66, in the first cavalry. He chronicled the five main battles of the war, including two he was part of — the Dakto and the Tet Of-

fensive — adding that, "Totally don't know if I was cursed or not. As a helicopter pilot, he summed up that "I wouldn't say we were ducks, but for those few seething troops in or getting them could feel like sitting ducks."

Marine Capt. Dennis Peterfered anecdotes of his experience in the line of fire and seeing wreckage around him, and asserted without the solidarity and support of his comrades, "I wouldn't be here today."

From the Marine Corps, Brevet Lt. Fred Lopez talked about his experience in Vietnam in the Danang air base, the relative luxury of a chopper plane in 1969, as the war though extended last phase had begun. He talked about the the so-called "ceasefire" and the Paris Peace Treaty in 1973, and President Richard Nixon's massive "backer" bombing campaign, then the melee in April 1975, ending the mad scramble to leave the region in the waning moment of American presence in the country. "Chaos, unrest and panic hysterical South Vietnamese officials and civilians scrambled to leave Saigon."

Another member of the panel, Maj. Jose Ramirez, spoke of the massive exodus of the "Boat people," trying to flee their North Vietnam-ruled country, some 500,000 whom drowned in the effort. Sgt. Peter Bie spoke of his experiences as a combat correspondent and then as a soldier riding the doors of helicopters, where life expectancy was about 45 seconds on a good day."

Air Force Lt. Col. Pat Runyon spoke of three women on the panel, including a combat nurse in the early '60s. She recalled a clarifying encounter, at the dedication

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# 'My service made a difference'

## ■ WAR

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Wall memorial in Washington, D.C., in 1982. A veteran with prosthetic legs recognized and thanked her profusely, explaining that she had stopped him as he was headed out of Vietnam on a plane. "You kissed me on the forehead and you whispered 'take care of yourself.' At that moment, I thought I lost my legs. My life is over. I want to die. But if our country has sent a pretty woman over here to rescue, then I must be worth saving." That soldier returned to the United States, married and had two children. So yes, my service did make a difference."

Carol Fritz, the widow of Coast Guard member Paul Fritz, detailed the too-little known role of the Coast Guard in the war, and Lt. g. Steve Penner spoke of the Navy's integral engagement in rivers and by sea. As Mr. Penner pointed out, the war began at sea, triggered by a sea battle in 1964 with the USS Maddox, and ending with the final shots of the war, in 1975, from the USS Turner Joy, which he was personally involved in.

Air Force Col. Phil Conran, the most-decorated officer on Wednesday's panel, gave an account of the Air Force's critical role in the war, and was critical of the chain of command from Washington D.C. He commented that "President Johnson used to say 'my boys can't even bomb an outhouse without my direct permission.'"

He added, "The United States policy was not to win the war. I say our policy should have been to quickly defeat the enemy and bring out troops home, thereby saving tens of thousands of American lives. War should be the last act a nation faces, when policy totally fails. But when you do go to war, you should go to win — not like we did. We went in with our arms tied behind our backs."

From another perspective, CIA operative in Saigon Hazel Blankenship said, "When I joined the agency and went to Vietnam, I believed I was going to help our military save the world from communism... the senior leaders of the agency were saying 'better dead than red.' I'm terribly proud of my participation and even more proud of the

men and women who were part of the Vietnam War effort. I will say, however, that, except for a handful of misguided American and Vietnamese politicians and appointees, very few people knew what the end game was supposed to be. We quickly realized we were there for each other.

"We lost so much in lives and capital, without knowing what the word 'win' meant."

To close out the program, Lt. Blankenship returned to the podium and made the observation that, hopefully, "never again will the warrior be blamed for the war."

As a fitting, comic relief-flavored finale to the event, everyone in the room stood as a film clip played, with the old Animals hit "We Gotta Get Out of This Place," being lip-synched by a series of Vietnam Veterans, half a century on. Clearly, though, as the Channel City Club event demonstrated, the memories and legacies of that "place" continue to haunt, linger and seek healing and understanding.

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