

'Firebase Chesterfield' showcases Vietnam experience



SUSAN SMILEY — MEDIANEWS GROUP

Reenactors at the Firebase Chesterfield event, from left to right: Jeff Russo, T.J. Truax, Matt Avery and Gabe Murray.

Reenactors pay homage to veterans

By Susan Smiley

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For about 48 hours Aug 13 and 14, the Chesterfield Township Historical Village was transformed into a 1967 military firebase as it would have appeared in Vietnam.

Reenactors came from around the state, pitched their military tents and camped out at the historical village with authentic or replica gear like that used by troops who served

in the armed forces during the Vietnam War.

Nancy Sinatra's 1966 classic song "These Boots Are Made For Walkin'" blasted from a small transistor radio just outside one of the olive green tents.

Many of the reenactors served in the military themselves and have a keen interest in its history. Others were inspired to become reenactors because of family members who fought in past wars — in particular World War II, the Korean War and in Vietnam.

"I think a lot of us do the Vietnam impressions in particular to show the veterans that we do care," said Livonia resident T.J. Truax, who donned U.S. Marine Corps gear and has been doing military reenactment for 15 years. "This is all about the vets. We had one who just came and talked to us and he was in tears."

Jeff Russo, of Muskegon, became interested in military reenactment because his father is a Vietnam veteran.

"My dad was a Vietnam vet but he never talked

about it," said Russo. "He told me he was so proud to wear his khakis and to serve his country, and when he got back home he was at the airport in his uniform and a longhair called him a baby killer."

As if on cue, a slender woman dressed in a floral maxi skirt and sporting granny glasses with pastel lenses handed one of the attendees a daisy while stating softly: "Make love, not war."

While most reenactors did impressions of soldiers from many wars, they

'FIREBASE' » PAGE 2

'Firebase'

FROM PAGE 1

agreed Vietnam reenactments are special because of the way troops were received when they came back to the United States. Instead of being hailed as heroes like those who served in World War I and WWII, they often took the brunt of the anger citizens felt toward the U.S. government.

Truax, who is a Marine Corps veteran who served

in Afghanistan, said he felt neither hailed nor hated upon his return from overseas. Americans, he feels, were very apathetic with regards to those who fought in that conflict.

Matt Avery, of Romulus, is an ex-Marine who fought in Desert Storm. He said it was a topic of conversation among his fellow troops as to how they would be received when they returned to America.

"We all knew what happened with the guys who fought in Vietnam and we thought we might get the

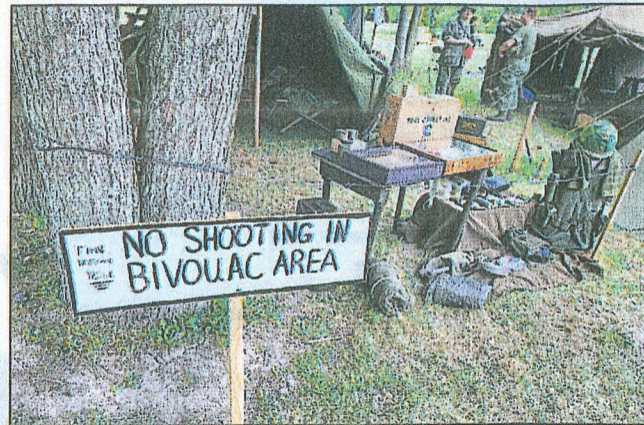
same kind of reception," said Avery. "But with us, it was the opposite. People were very supportive."

At the event in Chesterfield Township, Avery represented a Marine Corps troop that was part of a combined action platoon. This type of platoon was a counterinsurgency tool used by the Marines from 1965 to 1971 and placed a small Marine squad with Vietnamese residents from rural hamlets, some of whom helped to fight against the North Vietnamese communists.

"These were people who were just trying to grow their rice," said Avery. "You wonder if maybe the tactic should have been to protect the rice fields and make Vietnam the grain capital of Asia. Once people start making money, communism would have gone out the window."

"But that is all speculation now."

The weekend event was sponsored by the Michigan Military, Technical and Historical Society and the Chesterfield Township Historical Society.



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The reenactors camped out at the Chesterfield Township Historic Village.