

## Honoring The 'Forgotten'

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HARRISONBURG — The attitude toward veterans when Joe Brown returned home from the Vietnam War contrasts sharply with today.

Now 75, the Port Republic resident remembers being booed as he walked through the airport in Philadelphia upon return from overseas.

"They encouraged us not to wear our uniforms once we got home," he said

On Saturday morning, Brown was among more than 100 Vietnam veterans from across Virginia gathered in the James Madison University Festival Conference and Student Center ballroom for the second annual Vietnam Veterans Commemorative Luncheon.

Hosted by JMU ROTC, the event was designed to honor these "forgotten veterans," according to Lt. Col. Rick Showalter.

"It's a great teaching event for our cadets, since they put most of this together," he said. "And it's a way to pay back the Vietnam vets and show how grateful we are for their service."

The event featured several speakers, including Judy Robertson, who left Vietnam as a refugee in 1975 at 19 years old.

The keynote speaker was retired Command Sgt. Maj. Patrick St. Clair.

St. Clair enlisted in the Army Special Forces in July 1968 and participated in the 1970 Son Tay Raid in Vietnam, for which he received a Silver Star.

The mission, which St. Clair said wasn't revealed to the soldiers until the day of, was to rescue American prisoners of war from the Son Tay prison camp.

However, when the forces landed, they discovered the prisoners had been moved to another camp.

Despite returning without any POWs, the Son Tay Raid was considered a tactical success, and St. Clair said lessons from that mission carried over into present-day military operations.

St. Clair retired from the army in 2008 after 34 years of service.

Showalter said Saturday's event was important because stories like St. Clair's often aren't told.

"There's so much of this history that isn't taught in schools," he said.

Veteran Patrick Musselwhite said that was partially because some vets were wary of publicly telling their war stories.

"No one understands what a Vietnam veteran was going through or what they thought when they were over there except another veteran," the 67-year-old from Roanoke said.

Musselwhite said camaraderie is why such events as Saturday's are important.

"I still keep in touch with my company. We have a reunion every year in Branson, Mo.," he said, "but a lot of vets don't. They leave the service, go their separate ways, and never find out what happened to their friends."

Showalter said the luncheon was not only meant to make connections between the veterans, but to also connect the veterans to their community.

In addition to the speakers, several veterans organizations had booths set up in the ballroom, including Project Healing Waters and Breaking Free, that seek to help veterans who may be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.

Project Healing Waters hosts fly-fishing outings for groups of disabled veterans, and Breaking Free uses horseback riding as a therapeutic technique.

Several cadets from the university's Army ROTC program were also in attendance, something McGaheysville resident Gary Burner said he was glad to see.

"These events are good for us, but they're even better for future generations of service members," the 69-year-old Navy veteran said. "It shows that service to the country is important, and honor will never be neglected."

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- **Caption:** Retired Command Sgt. Maj. Patrick St. Clair (center) chats with guests at a luncheon for Vietnam veterans at the James Madison University Festival Conference and Student Center on Saturday. (Photos by Daniel Lin / DN-R) A Vietnam Veterans Commemorative Luncheon guest sports a vest at the event Saturday.

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