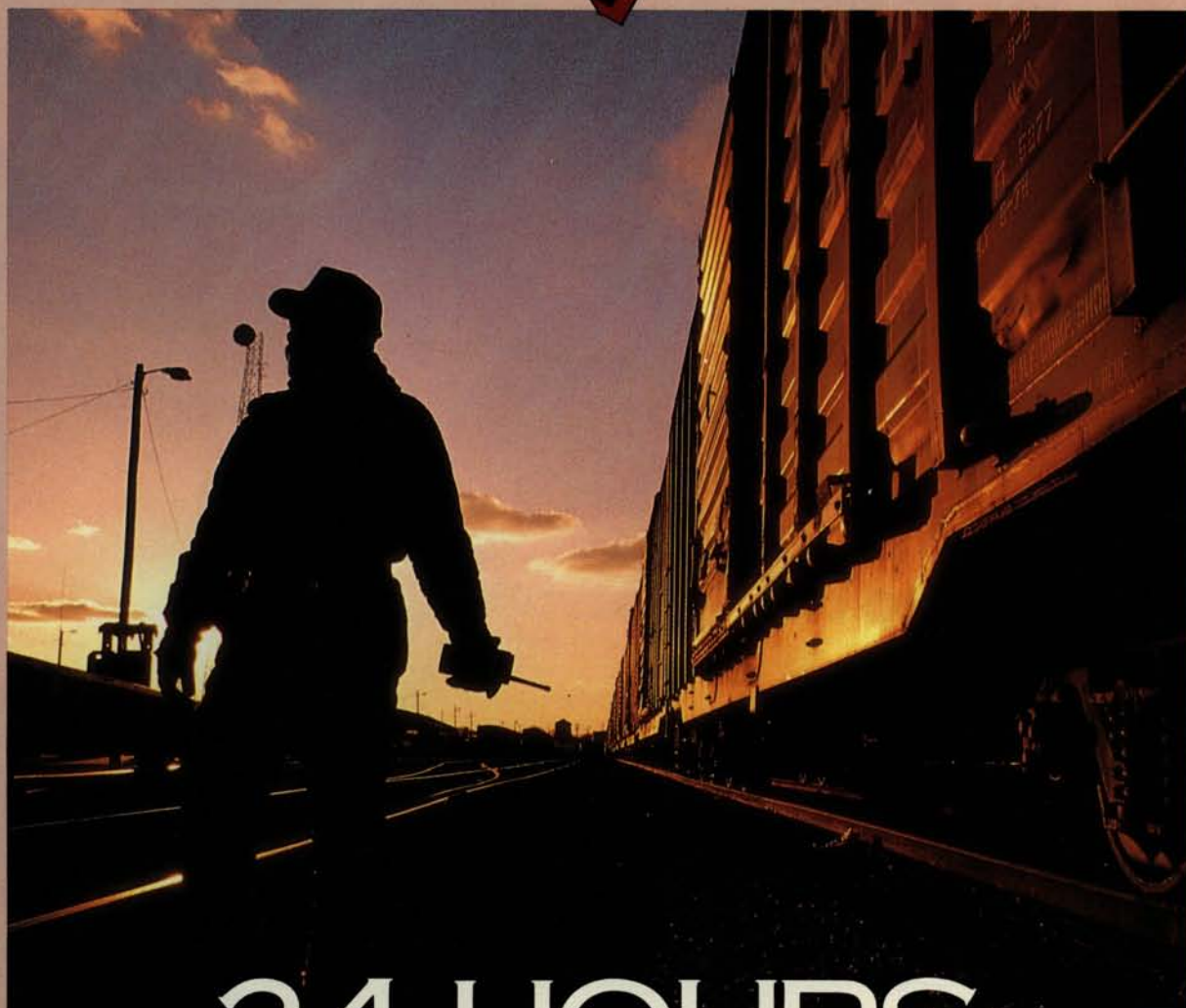


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SOLDIERS' STORY: VIET VETS "BACK IN THE WORLD"**

# Memphis

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## 24 HOURS

**A PHOTO SPECIAL: ONE DAY  
IN THE LIFE OF THE BLUFF CITY**

13TH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE



# SOLDIERS'

# Story

On this anniversary of the end of the war, four Vietnam vets talk about their lives "back in the world."

*Editor's Note:*

*Fourteen years ago this month, on April 29, 1975, the city of Saigon fell to North Vietnamese troops. The communist takeover of South Vietnam was complete, and the American presence in the nation it had vowed to defend was officially over. Still to be resolved, however, were both America's assessment of its role in the war, and its attitude toward the men who fought it. Indeed, in the 14 years since the war ended, public perception of the Vietnam vet has encompassed a host of conflicting images: from martyr to murderer, from mental and moral invalid to American hero—and everything in between. It's in this atmosphere of confusion and controversy that thousands of Vietnam veterans have sought to adjust to life "back in the world."*

*And now, on this 14th anniversary of the end of the war, we asked writer Natalie Jalenak to seek out and talk to some Memphis-area Vietnam veterans. We wanted to find out what their lives were like more than a decade after the war. Have they adjusted to the "post-war" life? How do they feel about the way the public often perceives them? Is the war truly over for them, a memory of years past? Or are they still doing battle of one kind or another, despite the passage of time? The answers, we found, are as different as the men themselves.*


*By Natalie Jalenak*

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CLAY TOMAS



**JERRY WOTEN:** His commanding officer was killed in a firefight. "When I left the service I wasn't a civilized person."

**T**HE COFFEE SHOP HOSTESS SHOWS US TO our table, alongside a row of decorative plants. Jerry Woten, who's agreed to meet with me, peers suspiciously out through the thicket of artificial greenery. "I guess we can sit down," he says after a moment. "I've got the area pretty well secured."



**ROBERT CERTAIN:** His plane was shot down over North Vietnam. "What happened... after Vietnam is that we [the veterans] were made scapegoats..."

ROBERT CERTAIN LEFT VIETNAM and followed a very atypical path in civilian life. "I went to the seminary when I got out," he explains. Today, Certain

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*Psychiatrists say some  
Vietnam vets may suffer  
from a unique phenomenon:  
Post-Traumatic Stress  
Disorder.*

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is pastor of Holy Apostles Episcopal Church in East Memphis. But he, too—even while studying in the seminary—encountered difficulties during the transition from military to civilian life. "I was never given a formal opportunity," he says, "or even guided in the direction, of considering my own personal actions [in Vietnam] from the theological or ethical point of view. I had to dig it out [myself]."

Certain has been married for 17 years, and has two children—a 14-year-old son and a 12-year-old daughter. His appointment to Holy Apostles in Memphis, where he's worked for the last four years, is his fourth assignment since being ordained to the priesthood in 1976. He served as an Air Force chaplain when he first left the seminary, then served at churches in Texas and Mississippi before arriving in Memphis.

Certain's two-year tour in Vietnam was spent flying 104 bombing missions as navigator of an Air Force B-52. In December, 1972—when Jerry Woten was run down by a car in Memphis—Robert

Certain's plane was shot down over North Vietnam. Parachuting to safety, he was taken prisoner, and spent three and a half months at the infamous "Hanoi Hilton" POW camp. "We were not badly mistreated," Certain recalls, "though I was hit a couple of times. But we were fed regularly." Released in March, 1973, and sent back to the States with other POWs, Certain received a homecoming reception far different from that which greeted many other returning veterans. He got a hero's welcome, complete with dinner at the Nixon White House.

Sixteen years later, sitting in his office with his battle decorations framed and hanging on the wall, Certain still ponders his role in Vietnam. "You're doing your bombing. . . from well above 20,000 feet," he says. "You don't see most of it. A fair amount of it was done at night. You couldn't see anything except the bombs blowing up—you're pretty well insulated." This had the ef-

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***"Help Without Hassle"—  
that's the slogan of the  
Memphis Vet Center,  
devoted exclusively to  
Vietnam veterans.***

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fect, he explains, of "dehumanizing your enemy. Our targets were described as stacks of supplies, channel markers, ammunition depots, that sort of thing—no people. So we could convince ourselves that what we were bombing were inanimate objects."

The truth, however, was very different. "One mission briefing I remember," Certain says. "There was a strike report, a body-count that occurred under a specific airplane: it was Red Two. That was our airplane. Under the bomb train of Red Two, there were 156 [North Vietnamese Army] regulars and Viet Cong killed."

Certain is philosophical about the intense hostility that many veterans encountered when they returned home. "What happened to us [veterans] after Vietnam," he says, "is that we were made scapegoats in the ancient understanding of [the word] 'scapegoat.' We broke some taboos. This goes into primordial understandings. If you break a taboo, you are an outcast until you are purified through special rites. The ta-

boos that we broke are 'America is powerful' and 'America is good.' We lost the war, and we committed war crimes—which rendered us ritually unclean. The Vietnam veteran is an outcast. Ritual purification was called for. The [Vietnam Veterans'] Memorial in Washington began that process [of purification]. When the memorial was dedicated, it started an awful lot of reflection. And suddenly, it began a period when it was popular to be a [Vietnam] veteran."

Certain smiles wryly before going on. "There are some dangerous things about that, as well as some positive things. The positive thing is that it's helped a lot of us to come out of the closet and start talking about it and reflecting upon it. The dangerous part is that we're being redefined as heroes. If we redefine that war as having been a holy war, then we set ourselves up to repeat it."

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THE BUILDING OF THE VIETNAM Veterans' Memorial in Washington, D.C. seemed to reflect the beginnings of a general American acceptance and recognition of the Vietnam vet. And now, a similar trend is evidenced in Memphis. In 1991, when the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers completes its re-development of John B. Edgar Point on the city's south riverfront, many veterans hope to see a new Vietnam Memorial on the grounds of the park land that the development will create. Robert Certain heads a new Vietnam Memorial Committee which, this spring, will begin soliciting contributions for the proposed memorial from businesses and individuals throughout the city. The Memphis Park Commission has agreed to provide a site for the memorial, and the city has agreed to maintain it if supporters can raise the funds to build it.

According to Certain, the memorial will not only be "of national significance," but will be, in addition, "the other half of the national monument" in Washington. That monument, he explains—like many others throughout the nation—lists the names of individual soldiers who lost their lives in the Vietnam War. Unlike those memorials, however, Memphis' Vietnam Memorial will instead commemorate the war itself. Certain says the monument will attempt to explain the purpose of the war, in order to show the value of the sacrifice made to the war by its veterans—both living and dead. It will be, says Certain, "a powerful symbol." Such a symbol will be, perhaps, yet another step in America's continuing attempt to finally come to terms with the Vietnam veteran. ■