



The event featured a "Veteran's Honor Walk" around the Montana Capitol building.

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As reported in the March 29, 2023 Independent Records:

The eighth annual Welcome Home Vietnam Veterans Day event was held Wednesday, and this year there was extra significance attached to the ceremonies, that being the 50th anniversary of the war's Paris Peace Accords.

Leading off the activities was the "Veteran's Honor Walk" around the Capitol building, with a laying of the wreath at the Freedom Tree/POW-MIA on the south lawn.

Next, the nearly 100 people attending gathered in the Capitol rotunda. After a prayer by Daniel Pocha of the Magpie Singers, Gov. Greg Gianforte read a proclamation, followed by staff members' readings of letters from Sens. Jon Tester and Steve Daines and Rep. Matt Rosendale.

The eighth annual Welcome Home Vietnam Veterans Day ceremony was held Wednesday at the state Capitol. Nearly 100 people gathered in the Capitol rotunda.

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Keynote speaker Bill Rich, a Navy Seabees veteran, served two tours in Vietnam from 1967-71.

“After landing at Phu Bai Air Base in Vietnam’s Northern I Corp just south of Hue, we noticed a group of Vietnamese women, children and men, standing on the side of the terminal,” said Rich, a construction electrician assigned to Bravo Company, Mobile Construction Battalion 121. “A few minutes later, a cargo plane landed and they started offloading coffins draped with South Vietnamese flags.

Vietnam veteran Bill Rich was the keynote speaker at the eighth annual Welcome Home Vietnam Veterans Day ceremony held Wednesday at the state Capitol.

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“That’s when it struck home for most of us that we were actually in a war and people were getting killed.”

Shortly afterward, Rich and another volunteer, both helmeted and armed with ammo for their M-14s, accompanied a battalion doctor to a village about a half-hour away. The two Seabees guarded the ambulance while the doctor and a corpsman walked over a nearby hill. During their wait, parked next to a rice paddy, a pair of Huey helicopter gunships flew in over the water “and made two passes, filling the rice paddy” full of lead.

“We spent the rest of the day with both of them and did not get back to our camp until early evening. And so passed the first day in Vietnam,” he said.

A couple months into his tour, a group of water buffalo mysteriously found their way inside the camp’s perimeter. To prevent a repeat occurrence, the

commanding officer ordered the battalion to randomly “man (their) fighting positions,” either all night or partial nights.

Or they were sent out late at night and came back after dawn.

Gov. Greg Gianforte played drums with the Magpie Singers for the closing ceremony Wednesday.

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“The first time we did that, the Air Force almost opened fire on us, as no one had warned them what we were doing,” Rich recounted. “I’m just happy they didn’t open fire because my foxhole was on the airport side of the perimeter.”

In late January 1968, while part of a small detachment sent to Hue for a couple days of maintenance work, “our world was turned upside down” when the North Vietnamese Army attacked the village, signaling the start of the TET Offensive. Hence they were stuck in Hue until the Marines reopened “Route 1 south” to Phu Bai.

One of the first memorable events during his second tour took place when the sky turned to a solid sheet of bright red dancing back and forth across a nearby hillside. A few days later they learned the light show was caused by an AC-47 fitted with miniguns firing 6,000 rounds a minute, known as “Puff the Magic Dragon.”

“Another night we had 16-inch shells (from a ship) passed overhead, fired at a target about a mile beyond our camp,” he said. “The shells sounded like freight trains and the explosions shook the ground we were standing on.”

Also, while working with the civic action (People to People) program, Rich carried an International Letter of Introduction from the Boy Scouts of America to the South Vietnamese Scout Association.

Rich, 76, went on to serve 30 years in the Navy, piling up a plethora of decorations, including the Seabees Combat Warfare award, two Bronze Stars, the Navy Achievement Medal, the Army Achievement Medal, the National Defense Service Medal with one bronze star, and the Fleet Marine Force Combat Operations Insignia.

He also earned the Navy Expert Rifle Medal with three bronze stars, Navy Expert Pistol Medal with two bronze stars, Vietnam Service Medal with one silver star, Antarctica Service Medal with bronze winter-over clasp and Humanitarian Service medal.

The Meritorious Unit Commendation Ribbon with one bronze star and Presidential Unit Citation were also among his recognitions.

Little Shell elder Daniel Pocha offered smudging at the Freedom Tree wreath laying during Wednesday's Welcome Home Vietnam Veterans Day ceremony at the state Capitol.

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"All in all, my experience in Vietnam helped me to fully appreciate my future travels," said Rich, who presently serves as the American Legion's Post No. 2 commander, "to other countries with different cultures and traditions, in many parts of the world, as a member of the military."

Chaplain Chaya Semple's closing prayer was followed by the reading of 256 names of Montanans killed in action in Vietnam.

Nearly 100 people gathered Wednesday in the Capitol rotunda for the Welcome Home Vietnam Veterans Day ceremony.

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The annual Welcome Home Vietnam Veterans observance was sponsored by the Montana Military Museum, the Montana Department of Military Affairs, Fort Harrison Veterans Administration and Hospital, American

Legion Post No. 2 (Lewis & Clark Post), and the Oro Fino Chapter, Daughters of the American Revolution.

In 2016, Ray Read and Pat McCain were instrumental in organizing the inaugural Welcome Home (Appreciation Day) Walk at the state Capitol. Read, a retired Army colonel and director of the Montana Military Museum, served as master of ceremonies and introduced Rich.

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