



JEREMY KIRK/Stars and Stripes

Cynthia Berginer, her husband, Timmy, and John Williams discuss the prospect of war at Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 6018 in Fayetteville, N.C., home of Fort Bragg. Veterans say a war is merited because of the terrorist attacks, but its challenges and effects will be long-lasting.

'War — it's never easy'

Combat veterans discuss coming storm

BY JEREMY KIRK
Stars and Stripes

FAYETTEVILLE, N.C.

The jukebox in the Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 6018 here on Chance Street plays smooth soul classics. Patrons sip beer and occasionally a harder drink. They have shed blood for the United States in World War II, Korea, Vietnam and the Gulf War.

And they all bear the scars.

Shirley Simmons — who works in the smoky upstairs bar — remembers the bodies in Iraq, and she takes pills to stop the rashes from her Gulf War illness. Albert Crosley received a Purple Heart for being shot in World War II. Timmy Berginer talked about his Vietnam experience at the prompting of a journalist for the first time he could remember.

It's at this post on the northeast side of Fayetteville where a healthy debate can take place on the future of U.S. troops at nearby Fort Bragg getting ready to deploy — somewhere. All vets draw on their ample combat experience and paint a picture of concern for soldiers heading overseas.

"If I was 20 years younger, I would be there myself," said Crosley, a feisty 87-year-old drinking a cup of beer. "That damn thing [the World Trade Center] was a monument. Well, I'm too damn old now."

It's the first time America has seen such an attack on its soil, said Oliver Coleman, who served in the Army for 24 years including three tours in Vietnam. It demands a response, even though the effects of war are terrible, he said.

"Being in a war — it's never easy," Coleman said. "But I feel like this: When someone comes over here and messes with our freedom, you get a different feeling. It makes you want to go out there. I'm sick now — I've got colon cancer — but if I could, I'd be more than glad to go somewhere and fight. There's no doubt about it — it was very sad. It's cold-blooded murder."

Simmons, 49, agrees. She deployed into Iraq with the 82nd Airborne Division with a unit that dealt with chemical weapons. She's sure that her illness was caused by exposure to chemical weapons.

But that doesn't lessen her support for President Bush's stance and troops who may be deployed to avenge the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon.

"I tell you, it's going to take a lot," said Simmons, who retired from the Army in 1995 as a staff sergeant. "My advice is, be strong and don't let your guard down."

She knows. She was shot in the face by an Iraqi soldier and had a wound that required facial reconstruction. But her shot back at the soldier was a kill.

The desert heat was difficult, she said. When she got off the air-conditioned plane in Saudi Arabia, she fell down as a wave of heat hit her. She remembers sand storms, friends being killed and poor Iraqi children scrounging for MREs, or Meals, Ready to Eat.

"We didn't know what it [war] was like," Simmons said.

The U.S. military's advanced technology undoubtedly has given soldiers an edge, said Cynthia Berginer, 44, who served in the Gulf War. But the draw-down of the early 1990s saw Army divisions reduced, and soldiers now may rely too much on it, she said.

"I think the politicians have relied on technology to save us, and technology is not going to do it," Berginer said. "It's going to take brawn and skills for leg soldiers."

"It [technology] helped us but it also hindered us in that we don't have soldier's soldiers anymore. We've got people with goggles on — night vision — and people who sit up there like they're on a Game Boy," she said.

Her husband demurred.

"Those are not soldiers?" Timmy Berginer, a Vietnam veteran, asked. "You want to go back to the Old West days of the Springfield rifle? You take advantage of technology. If they unleash the technology, there will be no need for ground troops."

The spirited debate ends with laughs at its momentary stern conviction. The concern is heartfelt — no one wants to see U.S. soldiers die. But unlike other wars — where there was no direct attack on U.S. civilians — this attack happened in the land these veterans love and the ideals they fought for.

Before the Sept. 11 attacks, soldiers in the Fayetteville community didn't garner a whole lot of respect, Timmy Berginer said. Now, soldiers are patting on the back, but it took a terrible act before people began waving the flag.

"A lot of people finally realized that it could happen here," Berginer said.

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