

## Veterans Day: Together United

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By Joe Baker



*Members of the Aquidneck Island Intertribal Indian Council perform in a drum circle during a Veterans Day ceremony Tuesday at Portsmouth High School. Dave Hansen | Staff photos*

In ceremonies more than four decades after American troops left Vietnam, veterans of one of America's most controversial conflicts were given special recognition Tuesday in Veterans Day ceremonies at Portsmouth High School. When Vietnam War vets were returning to the United States in the early 1970s, they were greeted derisively by a public overwhelmingly opposed to the war. In the words of Tuesday's keynote speaker, retired Maine colonel and former Naval War College professor Mackubin T. Owens, those vets were "vilified ... as war criminals." Although that attitude has long since changed, John P. Mangold, commander of American Legion Post 18 and organizer of the ceremonies, said Vietnam veterans deserved much more.

Tuesday's event honored all veterans, but the focus was on those who served during the Vietnam era. Attendees were greeted with a musical medley of artists from that era, including Cream, Steppenwolf, Rare Earth and Buffalo Springfield, and a slide show of Vietnam War photographs.

"It occurred to us we wanted to give our Vietnam vets the proper welcome home they may not have received," Mangold said.

The Portsmouth High School auditorium was nearly filled with veterans, their families and those who simply wanted to honor those who have worn America's uniforms.

One of the more heartfelt tributes was paid by Portsmouth High School senior Jonathan E. Corbett in an essay he entitled "Giving Veterans Shelter from the Storm." Natalie Yaw, of the school's New Patriots Club, read the essay to those assembled.

"Soldiers were spit on. Sailors were called baby killers. Marines and Airmen became objects of scorn in train stations, bus terminals and airports as they returned," Corbett wrote. "Service men and women struggled with the despair of friends lost on the battlefield, family who didn't understand their torment and substance abuse that seemed to be their only alternative when America turned a deaf ear to their plight."

Organizers spent weeks identifying more than 700 Portsmouth residents who served in the military and personally invited all to the Veterans Day ceremonies, Mangold said. About 200 showed up Tuesday and were individually honored with certificates, embroidered ball caps and braided paracord bracelets. The Town Council had passed a resolution declaring this week Vietnam Veterans Appreciation Week.

After the ceremonies in the school, the event continued outside at the Sgt. Donald H. Sisson flagpole next to the baseball field, where members of the Aquidneck Island Intertribal Indian Council performed two Native American songs to honor veterans, and retired naval officer Richard Ashmore played taps. The flagpole honors Sisson, a Portsmouth resident who died in combat in Vietnam in 1969.