Soviet vets talk about pain of war

By Woody Behrens

Echoes from the war in Vietnam reverberated through Campbell Hall at UCSB Thursday — by way of the Soviet Union.

In a class called “Voices of the Sojuz,” two young men from the Soviet Union talked about the pain, the suffering and the trauma that lingers from their country’s involvement in a most misunderstood war in Afghanistan.

The parallels to America’s Vietnam experience were striking, and the overflow crowd that included many veterans of that war listened intensely as Alexander “Sasha” Nemeshayev and Igor Moruzov shared their thoughts through an interpreter.

Nemeshayev, who lives in Moscow, served in the Soviet military in Afghanistan from 1984 to 1985. He said the intensity of emotions for those in the war could easily be explained, and the process of adjusting to a peaceful life back home is amazingly complex.

“One day you are fighting, and the next day you are leading a civilized life, where everyone has a peaceful life,” Nemeshayev said.

Little was written about the war, and what was written was colored so very few people understood what had been going on when we returned.

“There was no one to talk to for the veterans — to take off the heaviness brought on by combat,” he said. “The strong sought out other veterans, and the weak let their spirits fall, became introverted and started drinking.”

Nemeshayev said veterans’ organizations in and around Moscow are addressing the problem, but they have little experience or expertise to draw on.

“Because of this, we turn to our American friends for their experience in moral and spiritual rehabilitation,” he said.

The superpower link was established last year, when UCSB Professor Walter Capps, who has gained international acclaim for his course on the Vietnam war, went to the Soviet Union with a group of veterans, including King Illarga, news director for KEYTV, Santa Barbara’s ABC affiliate.

The trip by the Soviets, Capps explained, was an effort to strengthen the bonds established then and demonstrate to Americans the common problems and common solutions — all people share.

Nemeshayev mentioned some specific problems Soviet veterans face, including a shortage of rehabilitation facilities and artificial limbs.

“Man is trying to launch an industry for artificial limbs, and we are trying to speed the construction of rehabilitation centers, but there are long delays,” he said.

In the meantime, the need for psychological expertise is great.

Igor Moruzov, who served in Afghanistan from 1985 to December 1988, said the most difficult thing Soviet veterans have encountered is “to go from words to action and really help the veterans.”