

# Area's Vietnam Veterans Bitter

By Elizabeth Becker  
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They say the war they fought isn't the war Americans saw on television. And, these Vietnam war veterans say, the anger and for some the guilt they feel now is as equally incomprehensible to the society that in the words of one veteran, "has ignored us as they ignored the war."

"I felt like I lost a home when Danang fell; if I close my eyes I can see it all now, especially the kids. I'd like to go back—not to get shot at—but to talk to the kids, see what happened to them," said Vietnam war veteran Dennis Murphy.

Murphy, an ex-Marine who lives in Suitland in Prince George's County, says he doesn't trust politicians after he has seen how they've treated veterans. Recently, at a gathering in Lanham, he groped for ways to express the enormity of his shock at the recent loss of Danang by South Vietnamese forces.

"Danang going is like Andrews Airbase going. It was really that big; a PX, movie house, you know, a base like Andrews," Murphy said.

"I think like the war was really fought for nothing, I think 'what were we over there for?' and that's all I can say," said Frank Spillman, a Prince George's Community College student, who fought from 1967-1969 in Dongha province.

The veterans and those who counsel them were gathered at the Lanham Sheraton Hotel to attend a

day long conference on re-adjustment problems for Vietnam veterans, arranged by the Prince George's Community College Veterans Association.

Any gathering of Vietnam-era veterans is potentially explosive. These former soldiers seem as divided as society on the morality of America's involvement in that war. Record numbers of U.S. soldiers deserted in combat in Vietnam; others fought and came home to protest the war; still others avoided the draft rather than fight. Yet others fought and still believe they were right.

During the past months, the war has taken on a new poignancy for American veterans. They have watched the devastating news that the areas they fought for have apparently been given up with little fight by their former allies.

Since January, the northern two-thirds of South Vietnam has fallen out of the hands of South Vietnamese forces. In addition to the land, caches of arms, ammunition, rice, and heavy equipment were abandoned by South Vietnamese forces.

"Maybe the Vietnamese didn't want all the stuff we gave them," was the puzzled remark of Murphy.

The workshop attended by about 50 Vietnam veterans was meant to be an education session for the counselors, but it broke out into occasionally bitter arguments over the plight of veterans, as well as into hallway rec-

ollections of the "last siege on my firebase," and into sharp criticism of the Ford administration's handling of the end of the war and its survivors.

A good number of the counselors were themselves veterans and distinctions blurred when anything perceived as an anti-veteran remark was made.

"In World War II, they went through the horrors but they came back to ticker-tape parades, and the thing to do was to hire a triple-purple heart," said Bob Randolph, a veteran working in the community college's placement office. "I talk to employers every day and they say 'we don't need trained killers' or 'I don't need a junkie...'"

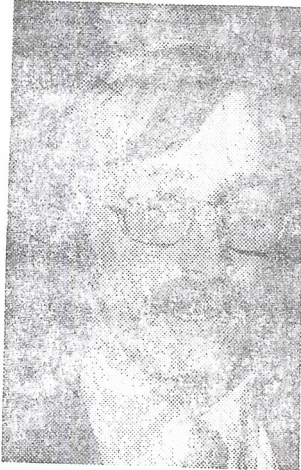
From the morning keynote address to the late evening discussions, the veterans talked about the meaning of the war for them now that South Vietnam was withdrawing from province after province.

Some also said they wanted to go back when they saw the misery on television... some to fight, some to help. Many said they felt they left something undone.

"This is a strange time to address the problems of veterans," began the main speaker Dr. Robert Jay Lifton, Yale professor and psychiatrist who wrote *Home From the War: Vietnam Veterans—Neither Victims Nor Executioners*.

"Since the offensive, the vets I've worked with have

# About the Fall



**TIM CRAIG**



**ROBERT JAY LIFTON**

... 'no one wants to listen to them'

said they're feeling again the old symptoms of anger, guilt, resentment, and restlessness, yet no one wants to listen to them," Lifton said. Lifton went on to describe the peculiar problems of the Vietnam veteran who fought in an unpopular war where everything seemed backwards to them.

"They told me in rap groups that they didn't know who the enemy was, it could be anyone... that they had to view the Vietnamese as gooks because every time they tried to be human they got screwed," Lifton said. "They came back and tried to recover their sense of humanity, but they were tainted by the war and often cast into roles of either powder kegs or junkies."

After his hour-long presentation, Lifton was ap-

proached by a veteran in the audience.

"I got out in '68 and you're the first to express what I felt," James Cariaso, a community college student, said, shaking Lifton's hand.

Later, Cariaso tangled in debate with a Korean war veteran, Kennie M. Maxfield, who said "Hell, I felt the same way after the (Korean) war but I adjusted myself. I didn't ask the V.A. (Veterans Administration) for help. "Aren't they (Vietnam veterans) strong enough?"

"It's not the same," shot back Cariaso. "Did anyone ever accuse you of being a baby killer?"

Another Vietnam veteran stood up and shouted, "Yeh, and were you ever accused of being a drug addict just

because you came from Vietnam?"

Maxfield answered that, "I'm 44 years old, I got a job when I came back, no one put me down because I helped myself."

"No one put you down, but you and your people are putting us down right now," another Vietnam veteran replied.

A veteran in the audience answered Lifton's opening remarks about the guilt of fighting in Vietnam by explaining that, "I won't take my son to anything that glorifies war."

Later another veteran, after debates over the merits of government institutions for the veteran, said "I don't want to see this generation turning into another American Legion or V. F. W...."

Regardless of the topic, during the formal presentations, the luncheon, the cocktail hour, or the dinner, talk strayed back to the current situation in Indochina.

"I attended a national conference in Dallas last week and when Danang fell the reaction of the 300 vets there was rage," said Tim Craig, recent past president of the National Association of Concerned Veterans, an organization concerned with veterans' rights.

Although they agreed that something was wrong with that war, the veterans had mixed opinions about the American involvement.

"I'd go back and do it again, I'm a hawk... there wasn't enough propaganda for our troops, they weren't

# of Danang

told why they were fighting and the U.S. produced a bunch of killers, ... that's what was wrong with the war," ventured Arthur N. Rogers, Towson State College adviser for veterans who had his legs smashed in 1969 at Swanloc and is now confined to a wheelchair.

"I look at the television and I want to go back, to help and to write," said Washington veteran Rusty Lindley, an ex-captain in the army with the Green Berets. "What I feel is the way (Daniel) Ellsberg did when he said Americans weren't fighting on the wrong side of the war, they were the wrong side. Now that we've left, it's all collapsing."

Of the 112,000 Vietnam-era veterans who live in Maryland, 25,000 are residents of Prince George's County and 2,000 study at Prince George's Community College. The small campus has had what experts describe as typical problems helping the veterans, but the campus has "put together one of the two finest programs on the East Coast," according to Dr. Walter J. Gail, head of the veteran's cost of education program for the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.

"Prior to 1972 Congress didn't see fit to spend money on veterans," said Richard Newman, president of the campus' veterans association. "At that time we had about 1,000 vets on campus and one coordinator."

Dr. Shonti Thayal, the community college's consulting clinical psychologist, recounted his work with Prince George's College veterans. These particular veterans, he said, have a suicide potential of from 82 to 95 per cent on a scale of 100.

"First their benefits are woefully inadequate, in most states you can get more on unemployment. The vet receives indifference from institutions, sometimes he feels like a burden, or a welfare or a charity case on the campus," Thayal said.

"The paperwork is endless, the switch from a regimented military life to self-sustaining study is often impossible," he said. "Nights begin around exams ... they lose sight of their goals. One veteran, for instance, told me that for nine days he didn't speak to anyone on campus."

Thayal was quick to say that not all veterans are seriously troubled but, "like someone working in an asbestos factory who is always susceptible to lung disease, the veterans who went through Vietnam have very common problems."

Asking that Americans look at the war and the treatment of veterans, Thayal ended by saying, "when you make a sacrifice you want to know if it was in vain. Even the believers now ask me what was it for, those 55,000 deaths and billions of dollars?"